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FARO SAUL, THE HANDSOME HERCULES; or, The Grip of Steel.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49,"
"THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



WITH A SAVAGE STAMP OF HER SMALL FOOT, QUEEN TITANIA OBEYED, COVERING THE MONEY AND THE CARD.

Faro Saul,

The Handsome Hercules;

OR,

THE GRIP OF STEEL.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "MOKE HORNER," "OLD '49,"
"DAN BROWN, OF DENVER,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A LOVELY YOUNG PILGRIM.

"No; we have been very fortunate in that respect. To the best of my belief, Good Enough has never been given a benefit by the gallant knights of the road."

"I am so glad!" with a nervous little shiver, and a sidelong glance through the open window of the coach. "I know I should die were we to be held up—isn't that the barbarous phrase?—by any of those horrible monsters!"

"Not the least mite of danger, mum," broke in the third passenger, impetuously. "One glimpse o' that face o' yourn 'd send the crookedest gang o' toll-takers a-whoopin' like a he-ole cyclone full o'—"

A short, mellow laugh cut him off, and a look of horror came into the eyes of the old man as he sunk back into his corner with a hollow groan, for her half-pathetic, half-coquettish speech showed him how woefully he had bungled:

"Am I such a fright, then? Am I a modern Medusa?"

"Fore the good Lawd, mum, I didn't mean that!"

"But you said it. I appeal to this gentleman!"

"Who decides that a compliment was intended, and doubtless would have been expressed, had our friend been permitted to finish his speech," lightly laughed the referee.

"Thar! that's white! an' it knocks the sit o' fickness galley west!" vehemently nodded the ancient, rallying. "'Deed an' double 'deed, honey, I jes' meant that ef the Old Boy hisself was to look into that angel-face o' yourn, all the wickedness in his karkidge 'd melt an' run out at the cracks in his huffs! One volley from them eyes 'd turn the wust road-agent into a preacher-man, an' a cut-throat to a suckin' babby!"

"Oh, don't! you make me blush!" simpered the young lady, drawing her veil and turning her face away in mock confusion.

As usual in those days, the stage which made a tri-weekly trip from Upper Ten to Good Enough under the skillful tooling of Don Bobtail Fandango, was lightly laden inside, and not loaded at all without.

"The time 'll come, ef we don't all dry up an' blow away fu'st," Don B. was wont to assert, with many a solemn oath. "It calls fer a monstrous sight o' waitin' an' watchin', but you jes' mark my words, cully. Good Enough's boun' to hev a boom bigger'n kin be made by ary thousan'-ton cannon you ever did seel. An' then you'll see the old man puttin' on heap style—boss o' the line, with twenty hearses each way, an' every way-bill fuller'n a Digger at a dog-feast!"

But Good Enough's boom had not yet startled the outer world, and Don Bobtail Fandango heaved a mighty sigh as he rolled out of Upper Ten with only three passengers aboard.

Said passengers, however, seemed well content at having the roomy interior all to themselves, and before many miles were traversed, they were on quite intimate terms.

First, by virtue of her sex, was Miss Stella Timberlake; young, lovely and slightly "gushing." Not at all offensively so, however, since she had only men for judges, who, like the majority of their sex, were rather partial to "that sort of thing."

To all appearance Miss Stella had more than one mile-post to pass before she fairly left her teens behind her. In so far as a dazzlingly clear complexion and a luxuriant mass of golden hair, charmingly frizzed and distractingly banded, she was a blonde; but her eyes, so far as they could be noted through the long lashes and the drooping lids, were dark, if not really black. One of her own sex might possibly have suspected that art had more to do with that magnificent *chevelure* than nature; might even have doubted the naturalness of that lovely pink-and-white color; but not so less acute mankind. The young pilgrim was too charming, taken all-in-all, for any such cynical doubts to trouble them.

Hardly up to the average height of her sex, Miss Stella Timberlake was plump, perfectly rounded in every curve, and just what the average man would pronounce perfection, seemingly formed to love and be loved in return—a miniature Venus. That she was one of those women doomed to become fat and dumpy at an early age, by no means detracted from her present charms.

Milo Vincent was the second passenger, in age somewhere between twenty-five and thirty; in stature tall; in figure superb; in face handsome; in address polite without being stiff, easy without being insolent.

As the artless queries of Miss Stella had already extracted, Vincent was at present acting in the capacity of mine-boss and general foreman in the employ of Good Enough's principal capitalist, Marcus Tudor. He had been to see about some delayed machinery which was needed in the new quartz-mill the mine-owner had just erected, had completed his mission, and was eager to return to his post of duty, for he, like Don Bobtail, firmly believed that Good Enough was on the very eve of a boom so startling and genuine, that all the surrounding country would open its eyes with amazement, then fall down to worship the modern Dorado.

Epaphroditus Weatherwax, the third passenger had given his name, and his personal appearance was to the full as odd as his cognomen.

Standing erect, the crown of his head would have grazed the six-foot mark, but with the various kinks and crooks in his otherwise well-enough built figure, the ancient lacked nearly half a foot of reaching that altitude. His body and limbs were well supplied with muscle, his extremities being shapely, if not small for a man.

A mass of grizzly, oakum-like hair covered his head and face to his eyes, while a slightly darker streak down the middle of his beard showed plainer than words that the old man was a devout believer in the virtues of tobacco.

His dark eyes had a sleepy look about them as a general thing, but an occasional glitter and gleam from their depths told that all the fire of youth had not yet expired.

His dress was rough, weather-stained, marked by the mud from a dozen different localities, to judge from the various hues and degrees of freshness. Here and there were visible rents more airy than neat, and at the first glance, the old fellow would be set down as a rambling bummer, a strolling rack-about—one of those melancholy wrecks which have been more or less common throughout the mining regions ever since the first grand rush to California in '49. But a closer inspection would shake this belief. The weapons which were supported by the belt around the ancient's waist, were of the finest quality and latest improvement. And from amid the soiled rags which covered his chest, could be seen the occasional glimmer of a massive gold chain, hanging around his neck in a double loop, then, losing itself in a fob beneath the belt. Surely no broken-down bummer would sport such a jewel!

As a sudden jolt of the rapidly rolling coach tossed the lounging ancient sideways, it revealed a peculiarity in his shape which rendered him still further an oddity. Without his actually being a hunchback, there was a curious protuberance just below the right shoulder of the old man, something in the shape of a new moon, standing on end, with the curve outward. Doubtless his spine had been injured in early youth, resulting in this peculiar curvature, deforming without in anywise detracting from his strength or activity.

Such were the three passengers whom Don Bobtail Fandango had the honor of "tooling" along the road from Upper Ten to Good Enough, on this bright day of early summer.

A brief silence followed the bashful murmur of the fair young pilgrim, but the newly-broached subject of road-agents appeared to have a peculiar fascination for her, and Miss Stella, with another shivering glance out of the window, as she unconsciously moved an inch or two nearer Milo Vincent, said:

"It may sound very silly to great, strong men, like you, but I verily believe I should die were we to meet with any of those frightful ruffians! Don't they kill and murder everybody they find?"

"Well, hardly so bad as that. There is an occasional accident, of course, when pilgrims have more wealth along than they can afford to part with; but, as I said before, we have not been troubled with the toll-taking gentry on this line. The enemies of our town say that there isn't money enough to draw such attention toward us, but that is a base slander."

"Then it must be because your citizens of Good Enough—what a curious name!—are too brave, too high-spirited to be chosen as tame victims. I am glad, and yet sorry, because, if those frightful creatures *should* come—and there is a bare possibility that such may be the case, you will grant."

Vincent nodded, Miss Stella paused with an inquiring glance into his blue eyes.

"All things are possible in the mighty West, Miss Timberlake, as you will discover, if your lot should be cast with us for any length of time. Still, it is highly improbable that we will have any trouble on this trip."

"Which the pizen critters want to make thar wills aforehand, ef they want thar 'lations to keep thar graves green!" uttered Weatherwax, in a deep, rumbling tone, showing his yellow teeth in a savage grimace, his dark eyes snapping fire.

With a little scream of aversion, Miss Stella shrunk back from the warlike Epaphroditus, unconsciously getting still closer to the handsome foreman.

"You horrid creature!" she gasped, with a pouting "mouth" at the ferocious rack-about that covered him with confusion, if not blushes. "You scare me to death with your awful hints! If the road-agents should make a descent on the stage, you would resist, and then they would kill us all—poor me, as well! I beg of you, gentlemen, not to resist, if they do come! Or, if you *must* fight, to wait long enough for me to alight and hide my eyes. You will, I know!"

Her plump little gloved hands clasped the strong arm of the handsome foreman, and her dark eyes gazed appealingly into his, while the red, pouting lips, just visible beneath the edge of the veil, quivered like those of a coaxing, half-frightened child.

Milo Vincent did not appear to actually dislike the situation, and as the coach jolted violently, his left arm slipped gently round the trim, yielding waist.

A low groan broke from the bearded lips of the ancient, and his lids closed with a spiteful snap, as he muttered:

"Sech luck—good Lawd!"

"What did you observe, sir?" flashed Miss Stella, suddenly releasing herself and flashing a glance toward the old man.

"I said no sech luck, honey. It's b'in nigh a week sence I chawed up a road-agent, an' ef it keeps on much longer, I'll git powerful weak—powerful weak, honey!"

"I don't understand you, sir!"

"Good Lawd!—I think everybody knowed that!" with a wild stare of surprise. "I cain't sleep soun' without eatin' up at least one road-agent a day! It's my business—keepin' the trails clear o' the pizen critters. You see them purty tools?" tapping the polished weapons at his waist. "Waal, it comes jes' as nat'ral to them as it does to me. Ef I was layin' asleep an' a gang o' them dirty whelps was to come in sight, them thar little playthings would jes' git up o' thar own a'cord an' turn themselves wrong side out fer pure joy—they jes' would, honey!"

Vincent laughed slightly at the puzzled look with which Miss Stella regarded the speaker, then said, lightly:

"You are evidently new to our wild and woolly West, Miss Timberlake, or you would show surprise at nothing—even a perambulating gas-bag. They are so common that we natives pay no sort of attention to them, unless to quietly puncture one when it becomes offensive. They make considerable noise, but there is no case on record in which they ever harmed any person."

"Young feller," began Weatherwax, only to be cut short:

"You are billed for Good Enough, I believe?"

"Sartain, but that ain't—"

"I will listen to what you may have to say at Good Enough, then. If it is important, you had better run no risk of being left along the road," coldly added the foreman.

The keen gaze which accompanied these words, spoke even more plainly, and the ancient sunk back into his corner seemingly totally silenced.

Vincent turned again toward Miss Timberlake.

"You are expecting to meet friends at Good Enough?"

"My brother Harold—yes," was the instant reply. "Perhaps you are acquainted with him?"

Vincent slowly shook his head, a curious light coming into his eyes as they rested upon the veiled face.

"Unfortunately, no. There is no such person living in the camp, to my knowledge. You are sure of the town?"

"Yes. He sent for me to meet him there. I believe he is mining, or prospecting, or something of that sort—your barbarous terms are all Greek to poor me!" laughing slightly.

"You have never been in these parts before then?"

"Never! I could almost wish—but that would sound so ungrateful!" hesitated Miss Stella, with an upward glance.

That peculiar, almost cynical smile deepened, but in no other way did Vincent notice the implied compliment.

"If you are positive that your brother bade you meet him at Good Enough, of course it will all turn out right; but I earnestly trust he will not make a mistake in the person!"

"A mistake—what do you mean?"

With his keen blue eyes riveted upon the face seen as through a mist, the handsome foreman replied:

"That I could have taken oath you were no stranger to Good Enough—that I had seen you there, many and many a time during the past year!"

The dark eyes beamed innocently through the veil, and there was a trace of wonder in the soft voice that uttered:

"You would be wrong—very wrong, sir! I never was in Good Enough—was never nearer to the town in my life than I am at this instant."

"Of course I see my mistake, now you deny having been there," quietly added Vincent. "It is only a case of mistaken identity, for which I must humbly beg your pardon."

"Which is freely granted, of course," with a light laugh. "But I am glad. I feared I would be alone among you rough men. I am overjoyed at the prospect of meeting a lady. Like me, you said?"

"In outward semblance, only, Miss Timberlake."

"What do you mean?" with a gentle stare. "If the lady is so much like me, I know we shall become famous friends!"

"I hope not," gravely. "Queen Titania greatly resembles you in shape and figure, though, come to take a second look, I must confess that your shape is a little nearer perfection—"

"Flatterer!" tapping him lightly on the arm. "Her face I have never seen," gravely continued Vincent. "That, so far as my knowledge goes, has never been revealed in Good Enough. I know that she always wears a mask in public."

"Masked—and Queen Titania—how romantic!" gushed Miss Timberlake, clasping her hands, her eyes sparkling. "Queen of the fairies, of course?"

"Queen of the faroes, rather," with a short laugh. "In plainer words, a very adroit and accomplished dealer of faro, at one of the public gaming-tables."

Miss Timberlake appeared to be seriously shocked, but as quickly recovered her powers of speech.

"Lady gamblers and road-agents! What a country! What was Harold thinking of that he sent for me to come unprotected into this frightful region of barbarism?"

"Durn the barbers, mum!" put in Weatherwax, with emphasis. "They ain't plenty, an' them what is hyar ain't opt fer to make a leddy trouble. While as fer the road-agents, the old man'll perfect you ag'in' all o' them you could crowd into a fifty-acre lot! I'll pile up a line o' cold meat round the hearse so high it'd take a turkey-buzzard to git over it in less'n a week, an' think myself paid ten times over ef you'll only len' me one o' them purty looks you sling so keerless at that young spark yender—'deed I will, honey!"

With a shudder of aversion, Stella turned a cold shoulder on the ancient, clinging more closely than ever to Vincent.

"You will promise me, I know—won't you?" she murmured.

"Anything that lies in my power, Miss Timberlake—yes."

"That you will not make a fight if those frightful men should attack us? I mean—that is," slightly quailing before his steady, piercing gaze, "without letting me have time to get out of the way. If you should resist, they would be just mean enough to fire into the stage, and I do so fear being killed!"

It was a rather peculiar request for a lady to make, and the old suspicions which Milo had felt returned with redoubled force. Still he showed nothing of this, as he replied:

"Of course I cannot deny a lady, and freely promise you that, should we be attacked by road-agents on this trip, I will make no resistance whatever. I have little wealth to lose."

The timid young pilgrim thanked him, more with her eyes than her lips, then sunk back into her corner of the stage. A silence fell over the trio, which was maintained for fully an hour; then came a startling challenge in stern tones:

"Halt! Hands up, or die!"

Instantly the stage came to a pause with a terrific lurch, and with a hollow groan the ancient tumbled off his seat, diving head-foremost under the seat, spluttering:

"Good Lawd! 'nother sit o' sickness comin' on! Tell 'em all I died like a man, with my face to the—Ouch!"

A thrust from Vincent's foot drove him completely under cover, where he lay gasping and wheezing like an asthmatic poodle!

CHAPTER II.

BETTER DEATH THAN DISHONOR.

"HALT! Hands up or die!"

There was the concentrated essence of pure business in those words and the tones in which it was uttered; and a far less wide-awake individual than Don Bobtail Fandango might have seen the point without much much cogitative examination.

"Whoa-up, laddy-bucks!" he cried, dividing his weight and strength between the reins and the brake. "Anything to keep peace in the family—an' halt she am!"

There was nothing else that he could do, under the circumstances.

Less than fifty yards in advance the trail made an abrupt curve around a rocky point, entering a narrow defile. Out of this cover dashed several horsemen, each one masked, each one with cocked and ready revolver, completely blocking the way. And at the same instant other masked men on foot dashed out from the rocks and bushes which lined the road over

which the stage had just passed. Eight men in all, each one heavily armed, commanding the coach from every side. Little wonder, then, that Don Bobtail showed such prompt obedience to that startling mandate.

Yet he did not seem seriously alarmed. Instead, a broad grin overspread his homely phiz, and his slipshod feet beat a merry tattoo on the foot board as he chuckled:

"I knowed it'd come! Boun' to, fu'st or last! Now let the envious whelps button up thar lips ferever more, amen!"

"Mind your cue, Short-and-Dirty," sternly cried the mask who had bidden him halt, catching the sound of those joyful words, and evidently suspecting the driver of attempting to open communication with his passengers. "All the interest you have in this funeral is to drive the hearse. Music, lads!"

In swift succession each man let off his pistol, the lead chipping bits from the corners of the coach, one even adding another ventilator to the crown of Don B.'s battered hat.

"Keerful, gents!" he cried, bobbing his head briskly, but smiling even more broadly than ever. "Thar's a female pettycut inside which'd be a pizen shame fer to git hurt."

"That's all right," gruffly responded the road-agent chief. "Give them the office, then. No one shall be harmed, if he is sensible; but if a grain of powder is burned, we'll turn butchers, and wind up with a be-old barbecue! Give it to 'em!"

"Say, you pilgrims in thar!" yelled Don B. twisting his short neck over the side of the coach in the vain endeavor to look in at the window.

"Unless you want the bull outfit bloody massacred, you won't do any kickin'. Thar's a thousan' gents out yer, each one armed with a two-ton bowl twister an' a rifle cannon, an' I kin see the loads a-stickin' nigh a rod out o' each bar!! Ef they ever tetch 'em off, the devil couldn't find the wickedest o' us ef he was to hunt all over creation with a bresh an' a fine-tooth comb—'deed he couldn't now!"

A stranger looking at the face of the driver and noting the peculiar unction with which he rolled these words over his tongue, would have suspected him of being very friendly to, if not actually in league, with the road-agents; but in this they would have done the honest fellow wrong.

Billy Brown, as he had been named in the far-distant days by his parents, was a character of note, in more senses of the word than one, and therefore deserves a little more respectful notice than he has as yet been accorded at our hands.

One of the original discoverers, his sanguine lips had at once pronounced the find "good enough for any hog!" And he so frequently repeated the sentence that the "new rush" at length became known by that name.

From that day the heart and soul of the honest prospector was bound up in the welfare and wholly devoted to the success of the little mining-camp amid the foot-hills. Louder and more persistently than a subsidized newspaper did the little man blow the bugle of Good Enough, fighting like a bantam cock all and sundry who dared cast a slur at the place, and in consequence passing fully one-half his time in "the sick-bay."

Without a dollar to bless himself with when the first stake was driven, Billy clung to his claims until the latest possible moment, firmly believing that the long-looked for "boom" must soon come, and eventually make him many a time over a millionaire; but the mournful day came at last when serious illness and a long empty stomach forced the poor fellow to loosen his grip on his claims, and his golden dreams went glimmering.

Though he no longer held a pecuniary interest in the camp, no one rejoiced more heartily over its growth, no one so quick to note an increase in the population or of the beginning of a new building or prospect-hole. Nor was there a man in all Good Enough who would more quickly fight for the honor of the town when some "chief" from the rival camps around came boiling into the burg, crowing over the "dead duck." It mattered little that Billy could not fight even a little bit; the will was there, and he never flinched from a giant. And as soon as he could crawl out of his bunk after one of these battles for glory of Good Enough, Billy was ready for another.

On all other points, he was so jolly, so inoffensive, so full of fun and the milk of human kindness, that few indeed of even those who disliked Good Enough the most were cruel or malicious enough to utter the words that would set Billy off, when once they found out his tender point. For several months now, the doughty little champion had not been called upon to battle for his loved camp, and some of his friends managed to get him a place as driver on the Upper Ten Stage Line.

Billy was "short" in everything save speech and temper. Short of cash, short of stature, short of wind, and wearing his hair, beard, trousers and coat very short indeed. From this peculiarity, together with his inordinate love of dancing and his pompous strutting when defending his idolized town, some facetious fellow

dubbed him Don Bobtail Fandango, whereupon Billy Brown was forever buried in oblivion.

But jolly as he seemed, there was one thing lacking in the happiness of the honest stage-driver. It is a mining axiom that as vultures flock to a feast of carrion, so a "flush camp" and plenty of "dust" brings road-agents. Don Bobtail was a devout believer in this truism, and ever since he attained to the dignity of driving a stage, he had just been aching for some of those usually unwelcome gentry to put in an appearance. With them, who could throw dirt at Good Enough?

And now, with the black masks before and around him, with the smell of burning powder on the air, Don Bobtail Fandango hugged himself in secret glee, "feeling good all over!"

A very feminine voice greeted the pistol-shots and another the voluble speech which Don Bobtail flung over the side of the coach, then a pale face, lovely even in its acute fear, was thrust through the window, just as the masked chief rode forward at a trot.

"Mercy, gentlemen!" gasped Miss Stella. "Spare us—I am only a poor, helpless woman!" "An angel, rather!" exclaimed the masked chief, doffing his hat and bowing low as he wrenched in his steed.

The compliment seemed involuntarily drawn from him by the sight of that face, but it passed unheeded by the fair young pilgrim. Her affright was more powerful than her vanity, and again she gasped:

"Have mercy—take all I have, but spare my life!"

"Ready, men, and look out for breakers!" sternly cried the chief as his followers seemed inclined to forget their duty in trying to catch a better view of that charming face. "And you, madam, need have no fears. We do not war on ladies. Nay," with a touch of impatience as Stella thrust out a beaded purse with trembling hands. "Keep your purse, lady. Once more, we do not molest the fair sex!"

A brief pause, then the chief cried, his voice hard and menacing as his pistol again came to a level.

"Pile out of there, you male pilgrims, unless you want to borrow leaden wings! Time up! Hay-foot, straw-foot—march, you cripples!"

The door was instantly unfastened, and Milo Vincent, bearing Stella Timberlake on one arm, emerged from the coach. His face was very pale, but it betrayed no signs of personal fear; and there was a stern, dangerous light in his blue eyes as he confronted the chief of the road-agents.

One swift glance the masked rider shot into his face, then turned again to the stage, grating between his teeth:

"Who else is there in the hearse?"

"Not a durned soul—hope I may die ef they is!" came a muffled, quavering voice, unmistakably that belonging to the valorous ancient, Epaphroditus Weatherwax.

Through the open door could be caught just a glimpse of a dark bundle crowding its way still further under the seat, its identity betrayed by the pair of coarse, ragged boots, that vainly strove to follow the rest of the carcass.

At a sign from his chief, one of the dismounted road-agents advanced and caught the old man by the heels. A gasping groan was followed by the trembling words:

"Good Lawd! the sit o' sickness hes struck in, an' I'm gittin' most powerful weak! Now I lay me down to—Ugh!"

Angered by the unexpected resistance, the road-agent gave a powerful tug that hauled the ancient out of the coach, a doleful grunt breaking from his lips as his head struck the rocky ground first.

"Now I be gone fer good! Keep my grave green, honey!" feebly moaned the old man, stretching out straight with a spasmodic kick that sent the road-agent reeling back.

"Tickle him in the ribs with your knife, man, and see if all of the starch is taken out of his legs!" uttered the masked chief, with a grim, hard laugh.

The fellow leaped forward, his knife flashing brightly in the sunlight, and a muffled howl of pain told how promptly he had obeyed this order. At the same instant the chief leveled his revolver and discharged one shot, the lead striking close to the face of the old man, casting a shower of dust and flinty particles into his eyes.

Like a galvanized frog, Epaphroditus Weatherwax sprang to his feet, his eyes protruding, his shaggy hair and beard standing on end, his body arched back into the shape of a bent bow, as his hands sought his wounded parts.

"Feeling a trifle more lively than you were, ain't ye?" maliciously asked the chief, grinning as he leaned forward in his saddle and gazed keenly into that forest of hair.

With a snap the open jaws came together, the bent bow relaxed so much that it curved in the opposite direction, and the ancient said slowly:

"Thank ye, boss, I be so! The sit o' sickness hes 'bout run its course, an' ef I bed on'y jes' a few fingers o' coffin varnish fer to coat my in'ards with, I reckon I'd feel right smart in a little bit or two—'deed I do, now!"

"What were you doing there, under that seat?" bluntly demanded the outlaw chief, ignoring this truly bumper-like hint.

"Me? Under the seat?" echoed the ancient, with a stare of mingled amazement and shame. "Did I do them things?"

"Look out, old man; I'm not in the humor for swallowing very much fooling."

"Ef it on'y was foolin'!" with a hollow groan and solemn shake of his shaggy head. "Ef it on'y was—but it ain't, the wu'ss' luck fer me! No, boss, it's dead open an' s'het seriousness fer the ole man! I'm subject to them sort o' spells. They ketch hold without givin' no warnin', an' they've got more different ways o' showin' thar-selves than a cat hes kittens! Sometimes I think I'm a dog, an' try to git onder the house or the barn, or some sech outlandish place, fer to work the sit o' sickness off. Then again it hits me right—"

"It never affects your clapper, I imagine," impatiently interposed the chief. "Bite it off, and swallow the rest. Get down to work, lads!"

At a wave of his hand, two men pushed the old fellow to the side of Milo Vincent, whose arm still supported the trembling figure of Stella Timberlake.

"Hands up, if you please, gentlemen!" uttered the chief, emphasizing his order with the muzzle of his revolver. "Both of them, Mr. Vincent. The lady is able to support herself for a few minutes, I reckon. If not, my arm is at her service."

With a flush and an indignant sparkle of her eloquent eyes, Miss Stella drew away from the side of the handsome foreman, who quietly raised both hands above his head.

With a dexterity that told how practiced they were at the business, two men thoroughly searched the twain, after having removed their belts of arms. A third man received each article and passed them over in turn to the chief, who either dropped them into a pouch which hung at his saddle-bow, or tossed them contemptuously aside.

"That's all, cap'n," at length uttered one of the searchers, speaking with evident reluctance.

"Nonsense!" angrily cried the chief. "You must have overlooked it! It *must* be there, somewhere! If you can't find it without, strip him to the buff—"

A little shriek of indignation from the lips of the fair Stella cut his brutal speech short.

"For shame, you brute! and before a lady, too!"

"You can turn your back, or hold your fingers before your eyes if that suits you better," with a hard laugh that possessed little of mirth in its notes.

"I can save you all that trouble, gentlemen," said Milo Vincent. "You have stripped me of every penny, of every paper and valuable I possess."

"Bab! you are lying!"

A hot flush crossed the pale cheeks of the foreman, and for a moment it seemed as though he was on the point of daring the death which menaced him from half a dozen pistols, for the chance of wiping out that vile insult with one stout blow. But then he steeled his nerves again, saying slowly:

"You are the liar, and the crowd as well, or you would never make use of such language to a man who is powerless for the moment to resent the insult. Man to man, you would not dare to repeat it!"

"Business first, pleasure afterward. Where have you hidden that money?"

"You have stripped me of every dollar I had left after paying my fare to Good Enough—I give you my word of honor."

"Honor is good!" sneered the chief. "But your boasted honor does not keep you from acting a lie, if not telling one in so many words. To vary the question: where have you hidden the twenty thousand dollars which you drew at Upper Ten from bank, to the account of Marcus Tudor?"

If that could be, Milo Vincent turned a shade paler than before as these words dropped from the lips of the road-agent, but his voice was steady as ever when he made reply:

"I have no money belonging to Marcus Tudor with me."

"You had when you left Upper Ten. You went there on purpose to draw twenty thousand dollars, the amount old Tudor agreed to pay Billy Whistler for his three claims. You pretended you made the trip solely to see about procuring additional machinery for the crusher, but that was simply a blind. You drew the money, in bank-notes, and had it with you when you entered the hearse at Upper Ten. Dare you deny, on your sacred honor, that what I state is the truth?"

"You have already had my answer. I have no other to give, though you question me until the crack of doom," replied Milo Vincent, his tones low and even, but his jaws setting firmly as those of a bulldog.

"There's more ways than one to skin a cat," with a short, brutal laugh. "Form a circle, lads, and bare your steel. You know the old trick. Get ready for it, and when I give the word, let fly!"

With a promptitude that showed how willing

they were to play their part in the threatened tragedy, the seven road-agents formed a circle around the two men, each one holding a long-bladed knife lightly by the haft, on a level with the breast of the pale faced but undaunted foreman.

"Once more, Milo Vincent, I ask you where have you hidden that wealth? Answer me, or meet your death!"

Not a nerve quivered, not a muscle flinched as the prisoner stood within that circle of threatening steel, staring steadily at the masked face of his questioner. Though he believed death would surely be his portion, Milo Vincent made no reply. For a brief space all was silence, then the masked chief made one more effort:

"For the last time I ask you. Refuse to speak now, and true as you stand on the earth, you shall die!"

"I have answered. I have nothing to add. I have not the money, but if I had, you would tear me limb from limb before I should give it to you. I can die, but even you can't dishonor me," slowly, calmly uttered the prisoner.

A motion of the hand, and the bright steel went flashing back, then forward, clashing together in a circle so close to the throat of the prisoner, that, had he flinched a single inch, death must surely have been his portion.

Instead, a cold smile curled his lips as he gazed into the masked face beyond.

"You're gritty!" he muttered, with an oath of sullen admiration. "I hate to kill you, but I'll have to do it, unless you chirp mighty lively."

At a motion of his bridle hand, the road-agents drew back a little and replaced their weapons. The chief leaned forward in his saddle with extended pistol-arm, until the frowning muzzle was within a foot of the prisoner's face. Harshly he spoke, without a trace of mercy in his tones:

"I've favored you further than I ever favored man before, because you show true grit. I hate to kill you, but we came out for that little boodle, and we're going to have it. Produce it, without any more trifling, or I'll send you hot-foot to heaven or hell—whichever may be your destination. It is your last chance. Squeal, or when I count ten, you die!"

Not a change in that cold, pale countenance told of failing nerve, and the masked chief began to count, with a brief pause after each number, as though expecting a confession.

But none came. The fatal number was pronounced, and still that white face remained unchanged, those blue eyes undaunted.

"You will have it? Then die! you obstinate devil!" grated the chief, his eyes flashing viciously through their holes.

"Hold! spare him and you shall have the money!" cried a clear voice, and Stella Timberlake sprang forward.

CHAPTER III.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

ON that same day in early summer, and at nearly the same hour which brought to the gallant Don Bobtail Fandango the perfect fulfillment of his most ardent wishes, Miss Zurilla Tudor was slowly leaving the scattered cabins and dingy tents of Good Enough behind her as she climbed one of the many hills with which that delectable camp was surrounded.

One would not have to watch her movements long before deciding that the young lady was out for pleasure rather than business. She had abandoned the road, and was picking her way among the rocks and bushes with which the hillside was so thickly studded. She turned abruptly to the right or left, without any definite purpose, it seemed, finally turning and with hands clasped behind her, stood gazing dreamily down at the picturesque if not beautiful camp, lying in the natural amphitheater so many yards below her present level.

"Lonely, wild, full of crime and evil passions!" came unconsciously from her lips as the light in her eyes deepened and grew more serious. "No society, no culture, not even a church in which to worship God! Could I be content to pass my life there? To live and grow to old age?"

The serious, sad look fled from her face, and a bright glow filled its place. The red lips parted in a glorious smile, triumphant, yet humble and sweet, and there was no trace of doubt in the voice that added:

"With him—YES!"

The sound of her own voice startled her, and flushing warmly, casting a swift glance around her, Zurilla Tudor turned and hastened still further up the rugged hillside.

But her maidenly confusion did not last long, and then she sat down on a moss-grown rock, gazing pensively down at the little mining-camp in the valley far beneath.

The leafy boughs of an overhanging tree cast a pleasant shadow over the rock, and Zurilla pushed the sensible sun-hat back from her face.

A face that could hardly be called beautiful by a lover of the strictly classic, it was that better thing: a lovely and lovable face. If some of the features were slightly out of proportion with some others, when viewed by the critical eye of a sculptor or artist, taken as a

whole they formed a most harmonious picture just then.

Gentle, yet proud and even haughty when there seemed occasion for such an exhibition of spirit; in repose bearing an expression that was serious, almost sad, yet capable of breaking into a glow and enthusiasm that reminded one of filling a marble statue with life and vigor, Miss Tudor was one of those who improve greatly on acquaintance, and who are better loved the longer they are known.

She was tall and shapely in figure, lacking yet a little of the fullness which perfect maturity would bring her, for as yet she was young, barely eighteen. Her hair was dark-brown, almost black. Her eyes were gray, shifting in hue according to the strength of the emotions which ruled her at the time. Ordinarily there was little color to be found in her pale, waxen complexion, but now, whether born of the ramble over that rough path, or of the thoughts which had so recently startled herself, a soft flush tinged her cheeks and lent brightness to the eyes which gazed so steadily, yet dreamily, down upon the anything-but-beautiful camp of Good Enough.

As Miss Stella Timberlake was saying, almost at that precise moment, it was a curious name, sounding oddly to ears only used to the commonplace nomenclature of the *effete* East; but it had a meaning, and that satisfied its first sponsors.

The prospects were "good enough" for the first party that struck the little valley, and many a painful of dirt was tediously washed out beside the shallow stream which came out of the mountain defile to spread into almost a lake, before word of the "new strike" took to itself wings and spread all over the country. Then, of course, a rush followed, and what might have proved good enough for half a dozen, made very slim fare for half as many thousands. In a very few weeks the cream was stripped off the placer-diggings, and the busy swarm melted away almost as rapidly as it had appeared. A few remained. Some, like Don Bobtail Fandango, firmly believed that time alone was necessary to make Good Enough the center-pole of all that region; others lacked the money to carry them away, for even if they tramped it, they could not do so without food of some sort to sustain their strength.

Among the few who came to Good Enough prepared for evil as well as good, was Milo Vincent, born and bred a miner, with practical experience as well as theoretical knowledge. It did not take him long to realize that the placer-diggings must soon give out, but the same investigations showed him that those grim hills contained treasure beyond computation for those who had the means, pluck and energy to wrest it from its birth-place.

Very quietly he did his work, keeping his own counsel, and when he had left Good Enough temporarily behind him, the young man knew he carried fortune's key in his pocket.

He lost no time in placing his important facts before Marcus Tudor, with whom he had already transacted business in the same line. He said that those hills were filled with high grade ore which would not be difficult to work. He showed his titles to his discoveries, daily recorded, and in the end convinced Marcus Tudor that he had "struck a mighty good thing."

"I have the mines; you have the capital which I lack. Of course the discovery must leak out some time, and if the amount of work required by law is not performed on each claim, they will not long remain unjumped. I haven't the ready money to do this, and it will be dangerous to wait. Promise me that you will do what is right when fully satisfied of their value, and I will sign the whole over to you according to law."

Doubtless the fair face of Zurilla Tudor had something to do with this unbusinesslike proposal, but if so, neither father nor lover said aught to that effect. Marcus Tudor took one night to sleep on the offer, then accepted it. The transfer was made, the mining-camp visited, the properly staked claims inspected, and men set to work at once to perform the amount of labor necessary to guard the claims for one year against all "jumpers."

Thus began the resurrection of Good Enough. Sufficient ore was taken out of the mines to prove their value, and then Marcus Tudor set to work in earnest. Machinery was ordered, buildings for the crusher and other works erected, men employed, and Don Bobtail Fandango was almost happy!

As the property became better developed, Marcus Tudor, realizing what a good thing had fallen into his lap, concluded to settle down at Good Enough. A cosey house was built, from lumber carried many a rough and weary mile; furniture was packed on the backs of willing burros, and then, when all was in readiness, Zurilla Tudor came to keep house for her father.

Through all this Milo Vincent was content to be known outside as nothing more than the foreman of the Tudor Mines, and such, in the eye of the law, was all he then was, though the articles of partnership, lacking only the attested

signature of Marcus Tudor, were long since drawn up in readiness for use.

"There is no particular hurry," quietly said Milo, his blue eyes filling with a subdued glow. "Let it be your gift to Zurilla and me, when she becomes my wife!"

And so it was finally understood.

It was thoughts of this, now not distant event, that made the pale cheeks of the maiden to glow and color like a blush rose, that filled her lustrous gray eyes with such a happy, blissful light, as she sat on the mossy rock, gazing down upon the distant mining-camp.

A charming picture she made then, but the only pair of human eyes which rested upon it at that moment, were hardly capable of appreciating it.

The sound of a heavy, shuffling footstep startled the maiden, and glancing hastily up, the color fled from her cheeks and the love-light from her eyes as she beheld a most disagreeable looking object: a ragged, dirty, leering tramp, on whose face was written evil passions so plainly that even she could not help interpreting them rightly.

"Tain't nothin' to skeer ye, mum," he croaked in a husky, rum-roughened voice, showing his tobacco stained fangs in what was meant to represent a smile of conciliation. "It's on'y a pore critter down on his luck, without money or friends, without anythin' to eat fer nigh a week gone by. It's truth I'm givin' ye, mum—dead straight truth! I'm starvin' fer want of a moldy crust to crack or a dry bone to gnaw, I be!"

Gaunt of frame, his cheeks hollow, his bleared eyes sunken deep into their sockets, the fellow might well be telling the truth, but somehow Zurilla was not thus impressed. Though he stood three yards away, her delicate nostrils could detect the scent of vile liquor, and in the mining regions drink means hard cash.

An ugly fellow, this tramp, one from whom a lady might well shrink. Seldom did a mortal being look more utterly beast-like. There was not a single redeeming feature about him. Even his dirty rags seemed the covering to a still more vile person.

His long hair and beard were matted with dirt and marked with bits of sticks and straw. A dirty patch covered one eye. Through the hairy mask could be seen scars and seams as of many a desperate struggle with fellow wild beasts. At his waist hung a long knife and a rusty revolver.

All this Zurilla saw at a glance, and she cast a hasty look over her shoulder toward the distant town, as though meditating flight. So the tramp evidently imagined, for he shuffled along until he had cut off her retreat, grinning maliciously even as he whined in doleful accents:

"Starvin', mum, while the likes o' you roll in riches an' lux'ry! Starvin' fer a bit to eat—jes' think of it, mum! A pore devil, down on his luck, sick an' not able fer to do any work, forced to beg to keep from starvin'—an' that same man once as rich an' way-up as your own daddy! It's hard—most powerful hard, mum!"

With an effort, Zurilla collected her courage, and drawing a small purse from her pocket, opened it and drew forth a coin. This she extended, but as that dirty, beast-like paw eagerly advanced to receive it, she dropped the money, shuddering at the idea of coming in contact with such an object.

"That will supply you with food, sir," she said, vainly striving to steady her voice as that detestable leer turned to a vicious snarl. "Call on my father, at his office, and if you prove deserving, he will cheerfully relieve you."

The fellow dropped to his knees to pick the coin from the crevice into which it had fallen, looking up into that pale face with an expression so devilish that it sent a cold chill running over her.

"Thank ye, mum, even though you was afeard to tetch my hand with your dainty fingers! Low-down dogs like us ain't no right to notice sech little things, but I couldn't help it; you showed it out so plainly. An' then—ain't I human, jest the same as you be! Mebbe not so purty, nur so dainty, but human, all the same. Yit I'm pore an' starvin', while you've got all the heart could ax fer! You roll in wealth an' plenty! You never hev a want nur a wish that a word won't git satisfied. You're so tender-hearted that it makes you shiver all over when you come face to face with a feller-critter who's starvin' fer the crumbs you wouldn't feed your dog! An' yit you on'y toss him a stugy bit o' money, an' bid him skin out afore his smell turns you sick!"

As he spoke, the tramp rose to his feet. The coin was hidden somewhere among his rags. His voice was no longer a whine, but contained a menace which was emphasized by the lurid, evil glow in his one revealed eye.

Zurilla felt that she was in imminent peril; but, though her face was as pale as that of a marble statue, all tremor, all outward sign of fear had vanished. She did not believe that there was any earthly help nearer than Good Enough, and her wildest scream could hardly reach to that distance. She felt that her one chance lay in showing an undaunted front, and though her very soul shrunk from the contact,

she looked the scoundrel firmly in the eye, her voice cold and even:

"You have no right to address me in that manner. I have listened intently to your tale of distress. I have given you means to procure food, and shown you how you could be still better provided for. Do not make me regret having so acted."

"A heap sight to brag about, ain't it?" with a savage sneer. "A bit o' gold the size o' your fingernail! Me a-starvin' an' you rollin' in riches! An' even that bit o' gold you hed to fling at my feet like it was a bone you was tossin' to a mangy cur! An' that is what you call charity, is it?"

"It is what I call impudence!" retorted Zurilla, with a flash of natural indignation that colored her cheeks and rendered her lovely indeed. "Go! Leave me, and thank your good fortune that I do not have you punished for your insolence!"

"I'll go, sart'in!" chuckled the rascal, making a sudden stride forward and grasping her by both wrists, leering redly into her eyes as she shrunk back with a gasping cry of terror and loathing. "Yas, I'll go, honey-love—when I've tuck down your stuck-up pride a notch or two!"

Throwing all of her strength into the effort, Zurilla strove to break away and flee from the drunken brute, but all in vain. His grasp only tightened on her wrists, bringing them together and then dexterously pinioning them both with one sinewy paw, casting his freed arm around her waist and drawing her closer to him, hanging over her pale face like a wolf above a dying lamb.

"You scorn the man beca'se of his rags an' dirt, do ye? You shivered all over at the idee o' tetchin' his dirty paw with your lily-white fingers, eh? Waal, what will ye do when that same dirty, ragged cuss kisses ye? Faint away, I reckon, even ef ye don't kick the bucket fer good-an'-all."

Choking, almost suffocated by his whisky-laden breath, Zurilla bent as far away as possible from the bearded lips that slowly approached hers. He seemed to be hugely enjoying her agony, and to be in no haste to bring it to a crisis. He laughed aloud at her vain struggles, and then, rendered desperate, the maiden dashed her forehead with all her power against the brutal face that hovered over her!

A howl of angry pain burst from the lips of the tramp, and he staggered back, shaken by that wholly unexpected blow. It was severe, even for a ruffian like him, too; for the maiden, frantic with fear and desperation, had not spared herself. A cut marred the whiteness of her forehead, and a little rill of blood trickled down her face as she fell back against the moss-covered rock.

Howling, the tramp spat out a couple of broken teeth, blood dripping over his beard, a very devil of evil glowing in his eye as he glared upon the girl.

"Cuss you, gal, I'll make you pay fer that!" he snarled, brushing the moisture from his eye, crouching as though to leap upon her. "I'll show you—"

Weak, dizzy, totally unnerved after that one superhuman effort, Zurilla lay wholly at his mercy, as it seemed. In mute despair she closed her eyes, just as a sharp report rent the air, followed closely by a wild, howling cry of agony, and she started to her feet to see the tramp reeling aside, one hand clasped to his breast, where the rags were rapidly turning red, then fall heavily upon his face, quivering spasmodically for an instant, only to straighten out with a choking gasp and horrible rattle in his throat!

This much she saw, as through a mist, then her senses failed her, and she sunk to the ground with a faint cry.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FARO PRINCE OF GOOD ENOUGH.

DIAGONALLY down the steep hillside, taking the boulders and bushes in his stride, dashed the man whose quick eye and ready hand had so completely foiled the brutal purpose of the one-eyed tramp. The smoking pistol was still in his hand as he paused beside the fallen wretch, first casting a brief glance toward the maiden who lay at the base of the moss-covered boulder, and the pointed hammer slightly lifted as he detected a faint shivering in the muscles of that bony neck.

A reddish glow filled his black eyes, the full, red lips were contracted until they revealed the white teeth they were wont to cover, while the pistol drooped until its muzzle almost touched the skull of the tramp.

"Not dead, you hound?" came gratingly through his teeth.

Faint though the sound of his voice, it seemed sufficient to bring life back to the fallen tramp, for his head was painfully turned around until the uncovered eye could stare up at the handsome face above him. A gasping, gurgling curse, then the painfully uttered words:

"Curse—played me—Faro Saul!"

That was all. His tongue stiffened in death, even with the name of his giant slayer on its tip, and with an audible breath of relief, the

pistol was suffered to drop by the side of the man whose sinewy hand clasped the butt.

Another glance toward the swooning maiden, then Faro Saul stooped and turned the body of his victim over, gazing long and steadily into the beast-like face, as though bent on learning its features by heart. He listened for the heart's throbbing; he watched to see if the lungs moved the hollow chest; he even took the hairy, dirty wrist between his fingers and felt for the pulse, now forever stilled.

Satisfied at last that the fellow was indeed dead, Faro Saul arose, with a low, hard laugh, muttering:

"Hard lines for you, Toby Tinker! But it had to be done, and I don't reckon you suffered much in cashing your chips."

Putting up his pistol, Faro Saul strode back to where Zurilla Tudor lay, a very different expression coming into his brilliant eyes, and handsome countenance, as he stood for an instant gazing down upon her pale features. Then as he noted the bruise and the blood-marks, that steady gaze turned to a hurried expression of anxiety, and stooping, he gently touched one slim wrist, holding his breath in his painful suspense.

"Good!" with an air of decided relief. "She's alive. I began to think I had another stiff on my hands, and that would be ugly."

With an ease and celerity that spoke well for his trained muscles, the rescuer picked the unconscious maiden up in his arms and bore her rapidly down the hillside, pausing near its foot, beside a little spring that bubbled out from beneath a moss-grown rock. Supporting her head and shoulders against his knee with one hand, Faro Saul dipped his scented handkerchief into the cold water and gently bathed the bruised temples. This simple remedy proved all that was necessary, and in a very short space of time, Zurilla gave a faint sigh and opened her eyes.

With returning consciousness came back the memory of the frightful peril which had threatened her, and a low cry of terror broke from her lips as she tried to start to her feet.

With gentle force Saul restrained her, his voice soft and musical as that of a woman as he murmured:

"The danger is past, Miss Tudor. You have nothing further to fear, while I am with you."

At the first words, the fearsome light in her eyes changed to a look of wonder, but as her eyes fell upon that handsome countenance, Zurilla flushed vividly, then grew pale again as she shrunk, involuntarily, away from his gentle touch.

A less keen observer than Faro Saul could not have helped noting this involuntary evidence of repulsion, and the fine lines of his face grew harder and more distinct as he withdrew his no longer necessary support and rose to his feet, his truly magnificent figure drawing itself proudly erect, his shapely arms folding themselves across his manly chest.

One very rarely meets with such another superb specimen of muscular humanity, perfect and just in all its proportions, though modeled on such a vast scale.

Saul Oberlin, in size, figure and carriage, greatly resembled the once famous Irish Giant, Ned O'Baldwin, and like that professor of the "manly art of self-defense," was "built from the ground up—a veritable Hercules."

Standing six feet and one-half high, and weighing considerably over two hundred pounds, without an ounce of superfluous fat or flesh, Saul Oberlin was at the same time so justly proportioned, from the crown of his head to the sole of his high-arched foot, that his extreme height was only noticeable when contrasted with that of others. His shapely head was supported by a muscular neck that sloped finely to the broad shoulders that were well squared without being too prominent.

His chest was full, but balanced by the masses of muscle which covered his shoulders and back, tapering down to a round compact waist, swelling again in long, sinewy thighs. His hands and feet were shapely, seeming small in comparison with the rest of his person, both neatly incased, one in kid gloves and the other in fine polished boots.

As he removed his silk hat, the soft wind gently stirred the curling locks of jetty hair which covered his skull. A neatly-trimmed pair of mustaches and imperial served to soften the sternness of his face.

His skin and complexion were clear as those of a woman, with just a dash of color in his cheeks and beneath his eyes, while his full lips were red as blood. His large eyes were black almost as jet, and just now contained a proud, yet mournful expression as they just rested upon those of the maiden, then sunk as his erect head slightly bowed.

His clothes were of fine material, fitting his magnificent figure to perfection, black throughout, save where a triangular section of his snowy shirt-bosom showed itself. In this glimmered and sparkled a solitaire diamond, that being the only bit of jewelry visible on his person.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Tudor," he said as he bowed slightly before her, his voice humble,

yet proud, if the seeming paradox be admissible. "Only that I saw you were in personal peril, I should never have ventured to intrude myself upon your presence. The peril is past, and I will relieve you of all further annoyance."

He bowed low, and retreated a pace, but without turning around, for the girl, flushing vividly, made a restraining gesture with one hand as the other assisted her to arise.

"It is I who should beg your pardon, sir," she stammered, her conscience hurt by that proudly mournful tone. "I did not know—I was so confused—it was not my intention to injure your feelings, I assure you!"

"Gamblers have—or should have—no feelings to hurt, Miss Tudor," the giant sport quickly replied, a peculiar light flashing across his handsome face. "I am one of that graceless class, as you are aware, and consequently far below the consideration of a lady. Believe me, I felt and appreciated all this, as keenly as even you can, when I dared to take you in my arms and carry you here. I meant to leave you as soon as your senses should return, lest you feel abased by coming in contact with a moral leper like—"

A little cry from her lips checked his rapid speech. He bowed slightly, and stood motionless, gravely listening to her hasty words:

"You wrong yourself—you wrong me, most of all, Mr. Oberlin! You have no right to use such language. Granted that you are the gambler you say, you preserved me from what promised to be worse than death! That horrible creature was—"

Her voice grew husky, and she cast a shivering glance around her, as though expecting to once more behold that beast-like visage.

"He is gone where he will never injure you again, Miss Tudor," quickly interposed Faro Saul.

"You did not—I remember hearing a shot—Merciful heavens!" gasped Zurilla, covering her face with her hands and trembling violently as the dread memory came back to her.

Again she beheld that rage-convulsed face—again she saw its beast-like fury turn to horrible agony as the hairy paw clutched spasmodically at his crimsoning rags just above his heart!

Lightly Saul Oberlin leaped forward and supported her sinking figure with his strong arm, his black eyes filled with a wildly triumphant light, but his voice sounded almost fatherly in its solicitude, its respectful tenderness.

"Forget it all, Miss Tudor, or if you cannot do that, try to regard it only as an ugly dream. Be brave; try to conquer your weakness, or I shall fear to leave you alone here, without a strong arm to support you. Nay," with a short, playful laugh, "if that will not suffice, think what a shock it would give Madam Grundy to see you helped home by a gambler!"

With a desperate effort Zurilla choked down that suffocating sensation sufficiently to drop her hands and lift her eyes to that smiling, handsome face.

"It was so unexpected—so terrible! I never knew I was a coward before; but that terrible man gave me such a shock."

"He has been a disgrace to humanity too long. When he had a few drinks of liquor aboard he never knew when to stop, though I never knew him to insult a lady before," gravely declared Saul. "It was fortunate that I chanced to pass near enough to see you and recognize him. I would have cried out to frighten him off, only I feared for your safety should I do so before being within striking distance of the wretch. However, it is all over now, and the sooner you forget—"

"That, I fear, will be impossible!" shuddered the girl.

The trace of lightness vanished from Saul's tones as he noted this, and he added, earnestly:

"You are still suffering, Miss Tudor. You must return home as quickly as possible. Suffer me to help you to the level, then I will fall behind, so no one will suspect that you have so lowered yourself as to have aught to do with a man of my class."

Tears dimmed the eyes of the sorely shaken girl, and her voice trembled as she spoke, reproachfully:

"You are cruel in speaking thus, Mr. Oberlin. You have no right to think me so basely ungrateful, after you having stained your hands in—"

"It is just that, Miss Tudor," swiftly interposed the handsome athlete. "My hands are soiled. I am a gambler—an outcast, vile and rotten to the very core, as men will tell you—as even your proud father will declare! It would be a blot on your name to be seen in my company, even on such an occasion as this. People will talk."

"Let them, then!" with a flash of her old spirit, her pale face flushing brightly for the moment. "Who are they to call me to account for my actions? I ask you to escort me home, not only to show that I am above such vulgar prejudices, but because I—I am really—not strong as I could wish!"

Her voice grew unsteady, and Saul made a motion as though he would lend her the support of his arm; but with a faint smile she moved to

the tree which shaded the spring, leaning against its trunk, smiling faintly as she added:

"This has shaken me more than I thought, I find. If you will give me a little water, and then aid me home, it will add immensely to the debt of gratitude I already owe you."

The Handsome Hercules turned away to pluck a leaf from which to form a cup, and perhaps it was well that Zurilla failed to note the expression which swept over his face and glowed in his dark eyes just at that moment. But it was gone when he handed her the leafy cup of water. His face was grave and respectful, his eyes quiet and unfathomable.

There were few more words spoken between them as Zurilla leaned upon his arm and they moved toward the camp.

It was near the middle of the afternoon, and few persons were stirring about town. Those few, however, paused to stare wonderingly at the twain as they walked slowly along toward the house of Marcus Tudor, only ceasing when they caught an ominous glance from the black eyes of the giant gambler.

If Zurilla noticed the miniature sensation they were creating she said nothing one way or the other, not speaking until the door of her home was reached, and Saul Oberlin gently dropped her hand from his arm, lifting his hat with a polite bow as though taking his leave.

"Not yet, Mr. Oberlin," said Zurilla, hurriedly. "You must oblige me still further by coming in and seeing father. He is within, and will wish to thank you for your kindness to his only child. You will not refuse me this favor?"

"Not when put as such, Miss Tudor," was the grave reply. "You have only to command, and I will obey."

Zurilla smiled faintly at his ceremonious politeness, but without saying more, opened the door and led the way inside.

Half in hand the giant gambler followed, peering on the threshold of the room in which Marcus Tudor sat—a cosey sort of office and library in one.

"Father, this gentleman—saved me from a frightful peril, and I wish you to—thank him—for my sake!" gasped Zurilla brokenly, as she flung her arms around the neck of the old gentleman, who started to his feet at their abrupt entrance.

She could say no more. Her overtaken nerves gave way, and with a sobbing cry, she sunk seemingly lifeless upon his breast, drawing a startled cry from his paling lips.

"She is not injured, only frightened by a drunken rascal. Call your housekeeper to help you," rapidly uttered Faro Saul as he struck the silver call-bell which stood on the table.

Half-distracted, Marcus Tudor hardly glanced at the man, and as the housekeeper, a middle-aged woman, made her appearance, he said, hoarsely:

"Help me take her to her room. Zurilla, my darling! speak to me—speak to your poor old father!"

Languidly her eyes opened, and a faint smile played about her lips for an instant; but that was all. And with great tears rolling down his cheeks, Marcus Tudor carried her out of the room, leaving the Handsome Hercules standing alone.

This did not appear to greatly trouble Faro Saul. The grave look vanished from his mustached face, and he laughed in low, exultant tones, like one who feels that he has won the opening move in an all-important game. And, handsome though he undeniably was, just then the athletic sport was not a pleasant object to gaze upon—the Lucifer looked out of those flashing eyes.

With a cat-like step he crossed the room and made a swift examination of the various papers with which the desk was littered, but as rapidly replacing each one in the precise position it occupied before he meddled with it. He did not seem to be looking for any thing in particular, or, if so, he betrayed no impatience by failing in the search. It was rather as one gratifying a petty curiosity to know more about the personal affairs of another.

For all he was so busy, the gambler did not suffer himself to be caught napping, and when warned by the sound of footsteps, he retreated to a chair, sitting quiet and like one patiently awaiting the pleasure of a dilatory host.

He rose to his feet as Marcus Tudor re-entered the room, and bowed quietly as the mine-owner hesitated before him.

"I trust your daughter is better, Mr. Tudor?"

"She is, though still weak and agitated," was the reply, given with perceptible embarrassment, which Saul was at no loss to comprehend.

"I do not wonder at that, considering what she has passed through. Fortunately I chanced to note her trouble, and was lucky enough to relieve her, by putting a bullet through the crazy rascal just in time."

"She said something—not much—but I did not think it so serious as that!" exclaimed Marcus Tudor, turning pale.

"It was touch and go. Another minute would have made all the difference between life and death, for her. But I didn't come here to make

my brags. I would not have come at all, only Miss Tudor urged me, and I feared she was not strong enough to make the trip alone."

"You were very kind, and I thank you, not only for that, but for— Who was it? And you killed him?"

Marcus Tudor was so agitated at the thoughts of his only child's peril that he scarcely knew what he was saying.

"I had to. There was no other way to save her. You may have heard of Toby Tinker? No! Well, it don't matter much, now. He'll work no more mischief, drunk or sober."

Marcus Tudor turned to the sideboard and poured out a glass of liquor with a hand that trembled until the glass and decanter clicked together like castanets. Swallowing this at a gulp, he once more, and with more coherency, thanked the giant gambler for the service he had rendered.

With a quiet smile Faro Saul stood and listened, uttering no word of approval or disparagement. It was embarrassing, particularly as Marcus Tudor was a small man in size, and forced to look upward to face the giant athlete.

"Is that all?" slowly uttered Faro Saul, as the mine-owner ceased speaking, fairly frozen out by that cool, steady gaze and enigmatical smile. "Have you nothing more to offer?"

"I am so agitated, that I fear I have expressed my gratitude but imperfectly," stammered Tudor, flushing. "She is my only child—all I have on earth to love or live for. Without her, life would be a bitter, dreary desert indeed! Knowing this you can guess how very, very grateful I am to you for rescuing her from that devilish scoundrel!"

Still Faro Saul smiled, but saying nothing.

"Of course—ahem!—if I can do anything—if you should ever want any—er—"

The word stuck in his throat, and Marcus Tudor could not mention money to Faro Saul, gambler though he was. He paused, flushing hotly and feeling very uncomfortable; nor was he set at ease by the low, mellow laugh which came from the gambler.

"My dear sir," drawled the gambler, dropping into a chair and crossing his legs carelessly. "You are very stupid! Here I take the trouble to rescue a charming young lady from danger, and you pay me in empty thanks! Is that business?"

"If money can—"

"But money can't—this time! I want the conventional reward. Give me the young lady, and we'll call it square!"

"Give you—what do you mean?" gasped Tudor.

"That I expect the hand of your daughter in marriage."

CHAPTER V.

THE LITTLE JOKER TURNS UP.

SHARP and clear rung out the voice of the fair young pilgrim as she sprung forward and made an ineffectual grasp at the weapon which the masked chief had thrust almost into the pale face of the undaunted foreman.

With a cross between a snarl and a curse, he foiled her attempt, his eyes flashing through the holes in his mask as they turned upon her, his voice harsh and suspicious.

"What's the matter with you? If you want to get through with your feathers unruffled, my dainty bird, you'll hold your hush until it comes your turn to chirp. Fall back!"

"Not until you promise to give over your murderous designs!" was the bold retort, the little woman facing the desperado, bristling all over, like a mother hen defending her downy chicks. "Spare his life, and I'll tell you where the—"

"Hold!" cried Milo Vincent, for the first time showing signs of losing his nerve, his handsome face convulsed with strong emotions, his blue eyes flashing brightly, yet imploringly as he held his hands out toward the little woman. "As you are a lady, I beg of you to keep my secret!"

A grating oath broke from the lips of the masked chief as he heard this, and leaning forward in the saddle, he thrust his revolver out and down so savagely that the muzzle cut the lips of the foreman as he pulled the trigger.

"You will have it, then?"

The hammer fell, but only the dull, metallic click followed. The cartridge failed to explode, and before the dastardly act could be repeated, Stella Timberlake sprung forward and knocked the weapon aside with her bare hand, crying sharply:

"Harm him, and you lose the money forever! I swear it!"

Milo Vincent was staggered by the force with which the pistol had been thrust against his face, but now, with a low grating cry of desperation, he leaped upon the masked rider, clutching his throat with both hands, tearing him from the saddle as though he were nothing more than a child. They fell to the ground together, the outlaw growling, cursing, vainly tearing at those sinewy fingers with one hand, while with the other he strove to grasp a weapon from his belt.

Had it been only man to man, there could

only have been one result, but, prompt to act, the road-agents pounced upon the desperate foreman, tearing him from his antagonist, striking heavily with fists and pistol-butts. Bruised, bleeding, half-stunned, Milo Vincent was thrown upon the ground while the chief of the marauders staggered to his feet, gasping, panting for breath which was expended almost entirely in fierce and deadly oaths.

As soon as the bloody mist cleared away from his vision sufficiently for him to recognize the shape of his assailant lying bound and helpless at his feet, the ruffian whipped out a murderous-looking knife, and crouched like a panther in the act of leaping upon its prey.

All this had passed so swiftly, that no one else had time or opportunity to interfere. Had he been the bravest of men, instead of having proved himself a craven of the first water, old Weatherwax could not have lent an aiding hand, for the road-agent who stood nearest him, at the first sign of an outbreak, struck him heavily on the back of his head with a revolver butt, almost bringing him to the ground, and so confusing his wits, that all was over before he realized what was occurring.

Stella Timberlake was flung aside when Milo Vincent made that desperate leap, and with difficulty keeping her footing, she only recovered herself in time to see the masked chief rise and flash forth his knife.

With a sharp cry the little woman darted forward, falling on her knees beside the helpless foreman, leaning over his heaving breast as though she would shield it from harm with her own, one hand motioning back the desperado, who crouched within leaping-distance, knife in hand.

"Back, you cowardly assassin!" and her voice rung out clear and menacingly. "Dare to harm this gentleman, and not one dollar of that money shall you ever finger! Spare him—swear on your word as a thief and cut-throat that you will let him go free and unharmed—that you will not—"

"No, no, I beg of you!" gasped Vincent, imploringly. "Do not betray me—do not render it impossible for me to keep my sacred trust! Better death than that!"

"Which is just what it will be," brutally interposed the masked chief, straightening up and slowly replacing his knife. "That's the only show for saving your wind."

"You hear?" softly uttered Stella, glancing down into the convulsed face. "He will murder you by inches unless he can lay hands on the money!"

"Let him! I will never tell!"

"Then I must!" was the firm reply, as the young woman rose to her feet and confronted the road-agent, paying no further attention to the husky pleading of the unhappy man whose life she seemed determined to save despite himself.

"You want that money; I can give it to you," she said, coldly, showing no signs of fear or flinching, as she faced the masked leader. "But, whether I will or no, depends wholly on the terms you are willing to make with me."

"Don't you be too sure of that, my dainty little bird," growled the ruffian, all traces of politeness having vanished from voice and manner since that brief, desperate struggle. "You'll be glad enough to sing out if once I close my fingers around your windpipe! Come! no more nonsense! Where's the boodle? Point it out, and be in a hurry, too!"

"When you have come to my terms," was the cool response. "Bah!" with a little laugh of contempt as the fellow raised one clinched hand as though about to dash it into her smiling face. "Do you think to frighten me so easily? Strike if you dare, and then whistle for your money!"

It seemed a risky experiment, but it succeeded. The fist was slowly lowered, and there was something of admiration in the voice which muttered:

"Well, you are a plucky one, for a fact!"

"Because I dare face a sheep-hearted wretch like you?" with a short, contemptuous laugh.

"Go easy, girl! Don't rub it in too deep!"

"Never fear," with the same careless scorn in her voice. "I am not so much in love with your face or manners that I care to protract our conversation any longer than is absolutely necessary. I simply wish to show you that, woman though I am, I hold the balance of power in this little game, and am not to be frightened into playing falsely by either threats or empty blustering."

"Have it your own way," with a poor pretense at a laugh. "It's only a fool that tries to wag tongue against that of a woman. Name your terms for handing over the money."

"She knows nothing of it!" hoarsely cried Vincent, struggling to regain his feet. "You have searched me without finding anything of it, and that should satisfy you that what I told you from the very first is plain truth."

"You drew the money, in bank-notes, and—"

"Granted," quickly interposed Vincent, speaking with more naturalness. "I intended carrying it with me to Good Enough, but something awakened my suspicions—I began to dread just what has happened—and I chose a safer con-

veyance for the money. It is beyond your reach, and you can't—"

"Not even by searching a woman?" broke in the outlaw, with a short laugh of triumph, as though confident he had at length gained the proper clew. "A rather embarrassing duty, to be sure, but one can stand a good deal when twenty thousand cases are at stake."

"If you have the nine lives of a cat, perhaps you might survive the ordeal," coolly retorted Stella Timberlake, who was "looming up" after a most extraordinary fashion for one who was wholly unused to the peculiar customs of the "wild and woolly West."

As she spoke, the rays of the afternoon sun were reflected brightly from a silver-mounted instrument which by some mysterious means slipped into her right hand. A deft motion lifted the hammer part way and sent the polished cylinder clicking merrily as it revolved over her left palm.

"Big and ugly as you are, my murderous friend, this charming little tool places us on an equality, so far as power over life is concerned," she said, with a low, mellow laugh. "I hardly think your stock of vitality is large enough for you to attempt searching me before I give my permission. Do you?"

With that gleaming weapon leveled full at his head, the masked outlaw had nothing to say. He shrunk perceptibly from the plucky little woman, and gave an audible gasp of relief when that equalizing tool was lowered.

"Enough fooling," he muttered, surlily. "Gritty as you are, you can't fight us all, and I warn you in advance, if you kill one of the gang, the rest will forget that you wear the dress of a woman, and treat you as your actions deserve."

"In other words, butcher me to make a howling circus, eh?" with a careless laugh.

"If they do, it will be your own fault. Come: your terms?"

"You are to let us go free and unharmed, and swear not to molest either of us until after we have had time to reach Good Enough. Do you agree to this?"

"He may, but I don't!" hoarsely cried Vincent, struggling vigorously to free himself from the stout hands which still held him to the ground. "I ask no favors—will accept none from the hands of such a cowardly cut-throat!"

"Rope the howling idiot, lads!" sternly cried the masked chief. "And if he tries to use his jaws too freely, clap a stout plug between them as well!"

His orders were promptly obeyed. Strong and desperate as he was, Milo Vincent could do little against such heavy odds. And while he was being bound and gagged, Stella Timberlake stood quietly looking on, contenting herself with:

"Do him any bodily harm, and I'll lay that hand cold in death!"

Doubtless this sharp threat saved Milo Vincent from more bruises than one, and he was but little the worse for wear when, ten minutes later, he was placed upon his feet close beside Epaphroditus Weatherwax, who still stood with hands elevated, like a ragged, shaggy statue of patience.

"Now then, where's the boodle?"

"Once more, I beg of you, do not betray me!" muttered Milo Vincent, his voice husky, pleading, his bloodshot eyes turned imploringly upon the strange young woman.

"It is for your sake that I do it," was the soft reply. "If I did not speak, that fiend would murder you!"

"Ay, and kill him by inches, at that!" chimed in the leader of the road-agents. "Don't forget that, my dear."

"I'll remember both the threat and you, curse you, dog!" grated the foreman, his eyes glowing luridly. "You'd better kill me while you are about it, for I'll never rest quietly until I have paid off this score with double interest."

"Let to-morrow take care of itself," carelessly retorted the robber. "When you call, I'll try and be at home. But now—to business. Spit it out, my gentle turtle-dove! Where is the boodle? Or do you prefer being searched? If so, select your man, and the rest of us will hold our hands over our faces."

"I have not the money; I have never even touched it. I cannot swear that I have seen it. Only for your questions, I would have known nothing whatever of the presence of a large sum of money in the coach."

"Ha! it is hidden in the hearse, then!" exclaimed the masked chief, moving toward that vehicle.

"To the best of my belief, yes," was the deliberate reply. "I saw Mr. Vincent cut a slit in the back lining, and fancied he was slipping something into the cut. I paid little attention to the act then, but now I have no doubt but what you can find the money you seek in that same slit."

The road-agent did not wait for the conclusion of this speech, but darted toward the coach and plunged inside. A few moments of searching the interior, then, with a yell of triumph, he emerged, waving a flat package over his head.

"Called the turn, or I'm a howling liar! Little daisy, you're a brick—gilt-edged and carved trimmings!"

Almost suffocated by his surging passions, Milo Vincent listened to the deliberate speech of the woman who was playing such a curious part in this drama. He knew that she had surprised his secret, and at that moment, forgetting all that she had done for him—that she was making this confession with the avowed purpose of preserving his life—had his hands been at liberty, he would have gladly choked her to silence, if not forever.

He watched the outlaw plunge into the stage with even greater interest than that displayed by the road-agents who had him in charge; but great as was his interest, it did not prevent him from feeling a gentle touch upon his wrists where the stout thong held them behind his back. And then, as he gave an involuntary start, he felt the thongs drop away, and knew that he had been set at liberty.

But by whom? He cast one swift glance around him. Epaphroditus Weatherwax was standing motionless, his hands still elevated above his head. Stella Timberlake was quietly watching the result of the search. It did not seem possible that either of them could have done the act.

"He stuck in his thumb, and pulled out a plum, saying how elevated is that, anyway?" laughed the masked outlaw, shaking the package almost in the face of the foreman. "You might as well have saved your time and kicking, my dear fellow, for—"

He never finished that mocking sentence, for like a flash the young man shot out one hand, tearing the package from his grasp, thrusting it into his bosom, even as his left fist dashed itself with stunning force full between the eyes of the astounded outlaw, knocking him headlong clear off his feet!

And then, with a roar of long pent-up rage, Milo Vincent turned upon his astonished guards, snatching a revolver from the belt of the nearest, even as he drove one foot heavily into his stomach, then leaping aside to avoid the hasty blow which the other leveled at him. The road-agent never made another one. A flash—a report—and he fell in a quivering heap with another eyelet in his black mask!

All this transpired with such rapidity that the eye could scarcely follow the swift changes, and the surviving road-agents hardly realized that trouble was brewing until their recent captive was free and armed.

Stella Timberlake uttered a little cry, and her pistol flashed forth from its place of concealment, but before she could use it on either friend or foe, it was knocked from her hand, and she was lifted bodily from the ground, swung into the air and settled before the saddle on the horse recently ridden by the masked chief. And into the saddle leaped Milo Vincent, one arm wound around her waist and controlling the snorting horse, his right hand clasping a leveled revolver, as he cried, sharply:

"Hands up and empty, you dirty whelps! The man dies who tries to pull trigger!"

Stella shrieked wildly, struggling to free herself, and this undoubtedly saved the life of at least one outlaw, who was raising his pistol. His aim disturbed by her struggles, Vincent missed his mark, and with loud yells the road-agents scattered as though to take him on either flank, thus being able to slay him without injuring the woman whose form effectually protected him in front.

One of their number dropped with a bullet through his breast; but the others would doubtless have proven too much for the young man, hampered as he was by the woman, who seemed to be frightened out of her senses. But then occurred a surprise not a whit less extraordinary than the sudden onset of the foreman.

With a shrill whoop and yell, Epaphroditus Weatherwax leaped upon the struggling form of the chief, tearing the belt of arms from around his waist, and then, with a revolver in each hand, he opened a furious fusillade, screeching:

"Git out o' the way, ye little fishes! 'Nother sit o' sickness comin' on. I'm a doctor, boun' fer to kill or cure; an' I don't keer a continental cuss which is t'other! Rap, slap, set 'em up ag'in. Open yer tater-traps an' take your dose o' medicine, ef it do turn ye wrong side out."

On his box sat Don Bobtail Fandango through all this, hugely enjoying the scene, and already forming the sentences which should carry confusion forever to those infidels who had dared to cast dirt in the face of Good Enough. At last his dearest wish had come to pass! The cap-sheaf was placed on the proud pinnacle from the apex of which his idolized camp should gaze blandly down upon her humbled rivals.

But when he began to smell powder—when he witnessed the desperate dash against such heavy odds by the young foreman—he could hold out no longer, and though guiltless of any weapon more formidable than his long-lashed whip, Don Bob hastily wrapped the lines around the brake-handle and leaped down to take a manly part in the affray, yelling fit to split his lungs.

With their chief down, with two of their number slain or disabled, before they realized

that fighting was intended, with Milo Vincent shooting as rapidly as he could work his pistol, and the ancient yelling out his wild rigmarole, this fresh assault was more than the road-agents could stand. They faltered, thus sealing their own fate.

A bullet from Vincent's revolver crashed through the brain of one—another dropped before the fire of the old man. The rest turned to flee, but they were fated to never again "hold up" stage or footman.

One ran almost against the muzzle of a pistol held by Weatherwax, staggering back with the entire top of his skull blown off. A second dropped with the last shot left to Vincent, and as the other fled in utter dismay, he was pursued by both the ancient and Milo. A short hundred yards he ran, then leaped high into the air, to fall a corpse. And with a dry laugh, Epaphroditus rose from his knee.

"Pears like they don't agree overly well with thar medicine, boss! Or, mebbe they've struck a sit o' fickness that makes 'em feel they wanted to lay down and go to sleep. Durn the odds, so long's it works. Who's the next patient that—"

A grating oath from Vincent as he saw the masked chief in the saddle, fleeing up the pass at full speed. Dropping the woman, he urged his horse in headlong pursuit of the fugitive.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD PAP WEATHERWAX DISCOURSES.

BUT fate was against the handsome young foreman in that instance, at least, and it was ordained that his marvelous victory should lack one thing of being complete.

With a fierce shout he drove his heels into the flanks of the horse he bestrode, lashing it violently with the double reins, forgetting that he carried only an empty pistol, without a single cartridge to make it effective, thinking only of the bitter ill-treatment he had suffered at the hands of the masked scoundrel who was fleeing in headlong haste from the scene where his triumph had so suddenly turned to bitter defeat.

A dozen swift leaps the good horse made, then its hoofs struck heavily against one of the bodies, and both steed and rider plunged heavily to the flinty ground, opposite the stage.

Though bruised and half-stunned, Milo Vincent quickly scrambled to his feet, but not so the animal. It lay motionless, with head doubled up beneath its body, its neck broken!

"Good Lawd! ef ever I see a bigger circus on the same 'mount o' ground, hope I hev to chaw gum fer a old maids' horsepittle!" puffed Don Bobtail Fandango, arms akimbo, one foot planted on the remains of a defunct road-agent, his little pig eyes rolling amid their surroundings in an almost delirious ecstasy of supreme delight. "Ef I on'y hed one o' them riggin's which they make pictur's by, I'd plaster 'em all over the hillsides an' treetops ontel the durned-est fool in nineteen States wouldn't hev the gall to hint that black was the white o' Good Enough's eye! Whoop-ee! full growed an' got her dyplomer ter show fer it! Oh, rig-a-de-jig, a-jig, a-jig!"

And away the half-mad lover of the mountain camp burst into a fantastic break-down, cutting pigeon wings innumerable, only ceasing when one foot slipped in a pool of blood and he sat down with a force that drove the rest of the tune out of his mouth in one explosive grunt!

Epaphroditus Weatherwax showed that his limbs were quite as active as his tongue, for he caught Stella Timberlake in his arms when Milo Vincent flung her from before him, though he staggered beneath that compact bundle of flesh and blood. But as he saw the horse stumble and cast its rider, a cry of concern broke from his lips, and with one glance into the face of the fair young pilgrim who had played such a curious part in the little drama, he lowered her to the ground and rushed to the assistance of the foreman.

"Durn my pill boxes!" he spluttered, as Vincent scrambled to his feet but little the worse for wear. "Kick over my best mortar an' spill all my cholery medicine! Ef I didn't think I'd hev a onj'inted vertebra fer to tie together when I see you trying to drive a 'tesian well with your head fer a di'mond drill, then I never physicked a patient fer the quinsy when he hed a lumber-goat! Be durned ef you ain't a tough 'un! Put her thar an' shake!"

"No nonsense!" panted Milo, dashing the mingled dust and blood from his eyes and staring wildly around him. "That devil will escape! Follow—get me a horse—quick!"

There were only the uneasy stage horses left on the scene of action. The animals ridden by the road-agents had all taken flight and dashed away, one of them bearing the masked chief with him.

Vincent started toward the team, but the ancient caught him around the waist with a power that was too great for him to successfully resist in his present state, crying:

"Take it cool, my pore feller—take it ca'mly, now, or I raaly won't answer fer the consequences! En'st you know you'll be down with a howlin' fever or fatal c'lapse o' the flues, an' then who'll settle my bill o' costs?"

"Let up—he'll get off—"

"He is off, a'ready, straddle of a streak o' greased lightnin', an' you want to ketch him by jumpin' a three-legged goat with a bob-tail! Ef you ain't growin' looney with the fever, then you've got the mumps, an' they're strikin' in, bad!"

Milo Vincent suddenly ceased his desperate efforts to break away, forced to laugh despite himself at the whimsical remarks of the ancient, uttered as they were with the utmost gravity and appearance of sincerity.

That laugh relieved the unhealthy pressure on his brain, and the dancing, blinding mist of blood which hung before his vision, vanished for good. He had suffered much during that short hour, and the heavy blows he had received on his skull, added to his mental anxiety concerning the charge which he held so sacred, lacked little of seriously disordering his brain. A few minutes more of the same pressure, might easily have proved fatal to his sanity.

"Say, you bottle o' fizin' cider!" cried Weatherwax, turning his head toward Don Bobtail Fandango, who sat where he had fallen, still humming bits of his favorite jig. "Git somethin' wet here in a hurry! Anythin'—whisky, rum, brandy, gin, or even water! Ef you cain't do no better, shin up a tree an' ketch a rain-cloud in your hat! Do somethin'! Don't you see I'm 'bout fer to lose a patient fer lack of a little bellows-mendin' lubrication? Durn it all, man! ef you cain't do nothin' else, holler!"

"I'm all right, old man," gasped Vincent, shaking himself together with an effort. "A sup of water wouldn't go amiss, but I reckon I'll survive without it."

"Didn't I say so? Sart'in you will—ef you don't go an' bu'st your b'iler ag'in by tryin' fer to ketch that cyclone on a mule's back in the next county!"

"It's too late for that, I'm afraid!"

"Unless you kin saddk an' ride a telegraph wire which ain't sot up yit—I reckon it is! Two hours sence he left the score, an' goin' a mile a minnit—count up how fur he is from the home base your own self!"

"I'd give my best finger just to have him within reach of my arm at this moment! Or even if I knew who he was!" muttered Vincent, frowning blackly as he remembered all that he had suffered, both bodily and mentally, through the agency of that arch villain.

"Mebbe the time'll come when you kin git a show cheaper then that," said Weatherwax. "The old man ain't a prophet—"

"But better than that, old fellow, and—"

"A physick-um, you mean?" blurted out the ancient, suddenly turning on his heel and trotting back to where Stella Timberlake still lay on the ground. "Durned ef I ain't, but I come mighty nigh fergettin' of it jest then. Stan' back an' give the patient air, gents an' ladies! Don't scrouge in on the perfession, onless you want to commit bloody murder! Stick out your tongue, honey-dove! Doctor won't hurt you—not a bit!"

The ancient dropped on his knees beside the little woman and gazed owl-like into her face, fumbling clumsily for her pulse. It really seemed as though he believed himself one of the profession to which he had made such abrupt claims.

With folded arms, Milo Vincent stood beside the patient, gazing steadily into her face, that curious light coming back to his blue eyes once more, and a faint smile beginning to curl his lip.

"Don't worry yourself, doctor," he said, speaking with deliberate distinctness. "I imagine your patient is not very dangerously afflicted."

Was there a barely perceptible quiver of the closed lids as these words dropped from his lips? Did those faint lines about the small mouth deepen and grow more distinct? Milo Vincent would have answered yes, without a moment's hesitation, even though the woman lay there like one dead.

Weatherwax flashed a quick glance upward, and just showed his teeth in a silent grin. Then he said:

"Waal, that'll be monstrous lucky, fer I reckon that pizen sit o' fickness is workin' off, an' I don't feel hafe so much like a pill-peddler as I did a bit ago! You try your ban!"

Stooping, Milo Vincent raised the plump, yet limp, figure in his arms and strode back to the stage with her. Gently lowering her to the ground, where her head could receive support from a rounded stone, he spoke to Don Bobtail:

"Look after the lady, Don. Fan her with your hat, or blow in her face, if you can think of nothin' else. She'll come to before long, never fear."

Turning abruptly to the ancient, Milo grasped his hand warmly, deep emotion in his tones as he uttered:

"Now I will say what you refused to listen to a few moments since. You're a hero, sir—a hero of the first water! You saved my life when I had lost all hope, for I know now that it was you who cut my hands free. I had resolved to have revenge on that devil, though I

knew they would butcher me the next minute! But you gave me a chance, and then, when that in—that woman, hampered me until I was almost at their mercy again, you came to the rescue like—like—"

His voice choked and he could not find words in which to express his surging emotions. His sinewy fingers contracted until the ancient visibly flinched beneath the warm grip.

"You think so?" he doubtfully asked, scratching his head with his unoccupied hand, an anxious light in his eyes. "Do you raally reckon ole Pap done all them?"

"You know you did!"

"I wish I did, but ef I do I'm durned ef I do!" with a mournful shake of the head. "It must be gelorious fun fer to be a hero like them, an' be able fer to upso't the hull eternal yaith with one turn o' the wrist—an' then not hafe try! But I don't feel that way. They ain't no buzzin' hot spring full o' laver an' sich-like, a-bubblin' up inside my shirt, nur yit my britches ain't chuck full o' nettles that sarve to keep a critter on the keen jump all the time; an' all the story books I ever read makes a hero somethin' like that!"

"But you did it—no one else," persisted Vincent.

"Waal, I'm glad of it, as fur as it goes," with a placid grin. "But it ain't me you want to thank. It's all 'long o' them queerious sits o' fickness! They jump onto a feller jest when he ain't thinkin', an' they ain't no tellin' what way the pesky things is goin' to make him travel—head up an' tail over the dasher, or with a ole tin kittle tied to his narrative! No they ain't, boss, an' I'm reelin' it off to ye so straight that it'd make a bee light-headed jest to try to foller the mark!"

"Fr instance: take it when them pesky warmints tumbled out o' the clouds an' hollered fer us to hyste our flippers. How was it? What kin' of a blanket was it that wropped ole Pap Weatherwax up inside of itself? What did that p'izen sit o' fickness do? Made the ole man think he was a dog with a powerful bad dose o' the collywobbles, an' sent him howlin' onder the seat to hide—an' ketch the toe o' somebody's boot that weighed a ton!"

Milo Vincent flushed hotly, as he muttered:

"I ask your pardon a thousand times! I thought you a skulking coward, and—"

"No matter," with a magnanimous wave of the hand. "Ef I wasn't them, the sit o' fickness was, an' it got jes' what sarved it mighty right! It wasn't me you kicked, boss, an' I ain't fightin' the battles o' them p'izen tantrums; I'm jes' tryin' to make you see how durned contrary they be, an' how monstrous onsart'in it is what they're goin' to turn a pore ole cuss into when they once git him in thar grip."

"Bit ago, 'nother 'tack tuck me, an' I thought I was a doctor right out of a pill-box, boun' fer to kill or cure everythin' what I tackled! That time it was all hunk; but as I said afore, you cain't depend onto the durned things. Mebbe the next time I ketch one I'll imagine I'm a lovesick kitten of a gal, red-hot in love with you, an' slobber all over ye afore you kin kick the durn foolishness out o' the ole man—fact!"

"Have it that way if you will, but bear this in mind," said Vincent, with deep earnestness. "You have made a friend this day who will stick to you through thick and thin! I'd far rather have lost my life than that package of money. You saved them both, and I'll never forget it. I'm too full to say much now, but if the time ever comes when I can serve you, rest assured I will act!"

"I say, boss!" called Don Bobtail, at this juncture. "Durn ef I know what to do 'bout this gal! She jes' lays thar like she hed done croaked an' skun up the golden stairs fer good!"

"Waal, I ain't feelin' so much like a M. D. as I was a bit ago, but I'm bettin' two to one I kin fotch her to in less'n forty winks," said Old Pap Weatherwax, striding to her side and stooping over the motionless figure. "One good kiss—"

"Try it, you ugly beast, and I'll scratch your eyes out!" sharply cried Stella, rising to a sitting posture and slapping vixenishly at the old man as he nimbly dodged aside.

"A merricle, by thunder! Who says I ain't a he-ole doc?"

"It is truly a remarkable recovery, and I congratulate you, Miss Timberlake," said Vincent, with a mocking smile.

She cast one swift glance into his face, then covered her face with her hands, sobbing violently. Still she managed to articulate with passable clearness:

"I acted for your sake, Mr. Vincent! I know you hate me worse than poison, but I did it all for the best. They would have murdered you, and how could I remain silent when one word from my lips was sufficient to preserve your life?"

"I would far rather you—but let that pass."

As though fearing to say more than he deemed wise, Milo Vincent turned abruptly away, followed by Old Pap Weatherwax.

Only Don Bobtail Fandango caught the swift glance which Stella Timberlake shot through

her partially unclosed fingers, and he turned away with a silent whistle, his little eyes dilated to double their ordinary size.

Stooping over the nearest body, Milo Vincent turned it over upon its back, and tore off the crape mask, starting back with a sharp cry as the features of the dead were revealed.

"What's the matter? The pizen sarpint didn't bite ye?" spluttered Old Pap Weatherwax as he shuffled forward.

"No—only startled me. And yet, I should not have been so taken by surprise," said Vincent, slowly, gravely. "I suspected as much, almost from the first."

"You've seed the critter afore, then?"

"Often. He worked for Marcus Tudor; was counted one of our best and trustiest hands in the mine!"

"Sit o' fickness tuck him, I reckon," dryly.

A hollow groan caused them to start and turn toward one of the other road-agents, and they saw him feebly lift his head and fumble at his breast where the red blood was flowing.

"Water! Ef you're white men, give me a drap o' water to quinch the fire in my throat! Water—fer the love—"

With a husky rattle his voice choked and his head drooped. Vincent sprang to his side and caught him, supporting his head with one hand, while with the other he strove to lift the black mask that covered the road-agent's face.

Even as he did this, the wretch raised the hand which had been partly lying beneath him, clapping a bared blade, with which he struck viciously at the heart of the foreman!

"You killed me—down to the devil fu'st, an' tell him I'm comin'!" he snarled with frightful rancor.

With a sharp cry Vincent dropped his head and leaped to one side, as the keen-pointed weapon pierced his clothing directly above his heart. The road-agent laughed in savage glee as he saw the red blood tinge the garments, but he did no more.

Too far away to arrest the blow, which he saw was coming before Vincent was aware of his peril, Old Pap uttered a warning cry, and grasped a ragged fragment of stone, hurling it with all his power, meaning to strike down the armed hand; but instead, the missile spent its force on the temple of the murderous wretch, knocking him back without time to even groan.

"It didn't go home? Say he didn't make the rifle, ole pard?" agitatedly cried the ancient.

Uncertain himself, for the stroke had been well aimed and a heavy one, Vincent tore open his clothes, to find that the knife had only inflicted a flesh wound of little magnitude.

"Thanks to this!" he uttered, gravely, holding up the flat package of bank-notes.

The weapon had pierced it near the center, and around the clean cut were blood-stains.

"Waal, I ber-durned!" ejaculated Pap, in admiration, as he gingerly fingered the package. "That's a new idee! When I git rich enough, durned ef if I don't quilt my ole karkidge all over with thousan' dollar notes! It's better then a sheet-iron undershirt—it jes' is!"

Silently Vincent replaced the valuable package for which he had so nearly sacrificed his life, only to have it preserve him in turn. Then he cautiously stooped over the road-agent, uttering a short murmur of regret as he noted the shattered skull. He tore off the bloody mask, and recognized another of the men who had long been employed by Marcus Tudor.

"Treacherous as the fellow was, I would give a good deal to bring him back to life again!" he muttered.

"That he mought squeal afore he croaked, eh?"

"Yes. I would give a year of my life to know for certain who put up this job—who that fellow is that escaped!"

"Mebbe you kin git it cheaper'n that. Look at the rest."

But of the entire seven men, not one retained a spark of life. The two heroes had performed their work only too well.

"Mebbe it won't be so hard, after all," said Weatherwax, after the examination was completed. "You say the imps all belong to the force you bossed in the mines?"

"Four of them; the others are idle roughs, who have hung about town for some time past. The leader may have been one of the same crowd."

"It's even odds that he wasn't. Those men was workin' onder you. They found out somehow that you was goin' to fetch in a fat boodle, an' when they made up thar mind fer to go fer it, heavy, is it likely they'd pick a chief from the outside?"

Vincent was impressed with this method of reasoning, but for all that he slowly shook his head.

"Even so, though something tells me that you are on the wrong track, we have no clew to the rascal. He will go back to work, and if he keeps his own secret, how am I to detect him?"

"By his voice, his figger, his actions, all putt together. When you see a man that makes you think of the critter who tried to run the side show, look him mighty cluss in the face fer the handwrite of your knuckles. They'll show plain enough to tell the truth for a week to come, sure!"

"There may be something in that!" ejaculated Vincent, his brow clearing a little.

"It's good advice, ef a fool did give it, eh?" grinned the ancient, as they moved toward the stage.

As they approached, Stella Timberlake suddenly arose and came forward, her hands tightly clasped before her, her eyes moist with tears, her voice broken and trembling as she said:

"Once more, Mr. Vincent, I beg of you to forgive me! I did it all for the best. I could not stand by in silence and see you murdered by that brutal wretch. I saw that you would die before surrendering your charge, but how could I keep still when I knew well that one word would preserve your life?"

While she poured forth these words, Milo gazed steadily, keenly into her eyes, as though striving to find something in them which would solve the doubts he evidently entertained. And when she paused, with a little, choking sob, he said, gravely:

"Doubtless you acted as you felt, Miss Timberlake. Some day I hope to thank you as you deserve, but just now I have too much to think over, to do the subject justice."

"You still feel resentment—well," with a low sigh, as her head bowed and she turned partially away, "I will have to bear it. Some day you will do me justice."

"If it ever lies in my power, be sure of that, Miss Timberlake!" was the swift response.

She flashed a side glance upward as though in doubt how to take this speech, but Vincent had already turned his back.

"Help the lady inside, Don," he said, briefly.

The fat little driver hastened to obey, but with a proud gesture of denial, Stella Timberlake avoided him, entering the stage and closing the door behind her with what, in a man, would have been a very spiteful slam.

Pap Weatherwax looked curiously into the grave, pale face of the young man, then nodded slowly, a faint whistle parting his bearded lips. But he had the sense to make no comments on the discovery which he believed he had made.

"Lend a hand, Don," said Vincent, in a more natural tone. "You shall go into camp with a full load for once, and if any one dares fling out a slur on dear old Good Enough, you will have the evidence to back your retort."

"I knowed it'd come, boss—I was dead sure on it!" and there was something that seemed to rise and swell in the fat driver's throat that prevented him from saying anything more.

In silence they hoisted the seven bodies to the roof of the stage, where Don Bobtail quickly bound them fast. Then the two men entered the stage, closing the door behind them.

Don Bobtail Fandango, the proudest man that ever entered Good Enough, chirped to his horses, and the coach, with its ghastly outside passengers rolled rapidly away, to carry surprise and consternation to some of the citizens.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXHIBITION OF CHEEK.

MARCUS TUDOR stared at the handsome gambler in open-eyed amazement, unable for the moment to credit the evidence of his own senses. Then he gasped:

"What the foul fiend do you mean, anyhow?"

"Precisely what I said—no less," was the prompt response. "But you are needlessly excited, my dear sir. First you know, you'll have a fit of apoplexy. Sit down and calm yourself, my worthy host—do!"

There was something in that cool, deliberate tone which stung the mine-owner to the very quick. His hands clinched, his cheeks grew almost purple, his eyes flashed with the not yet extinguished fires of a strong and fierce-willed youth. It seemed as though, forgetful of the terrible odds against him, he was about to leap at the throat of the insolent speaker; but with a vigorous effort he conquered this mad impulse.

"If this be intended for a jest, Mr. Oberlin, permit me to say that it is in very bad taste. Just at this moment, I am not in the temper to appreciate any such extravagance," he said, slowly and with almost painful distinctness, for even yet he could not forget the great service which this man had rendered him, through his idolized daughter.

"That's a pity, old cock!" yawned Faro Saul, without even a pretense by way of disguise. "But I'm in no particular haste. Business won't begin for three or four hours yet, and I can wait."

"For what, may I ask?"

"For you to brush up your wits so that you can comprehend plain English when you hear it spoken. Take your own time, daddy that is to be, and I'll blow a cloud while waiting for you to get your second wind."

Biting the tip off of a cigar, Faro Saul struck a patent lighter, and then leaned lazily back in his seat, gazing with half-closed eyes at the mine-owner, plainly enjoying the deep amazement into which his strange actions had plunged him.

This was the last feather. Detesting tobacco himself, and quite as likely to introduce a rattlesnake into his pet room as the odor which now smelled so rank in his nostrils, Marcus Tudor burst forth in a passion that threatened serious

consequences, if only in the bursting of a blood-vessel.

"Why, you infernally impudent scoundrel! You brazen-cheeked black-leg! How dare you? Get out of my house, or I'll forget that I was raised a gentleman, and kick you out!" he cried, hoarsely, flinging aside his chair and half-crouching for a leap at the throat of the giant.

But Saul "didn't scare worth a cent," as he himself might have expressed it. Lolling back in his chair, his head turned a little to one side, his lighted cigar pointing straight upward, his eyes half-closed to avoid the curling smoke, he gazed quizzically at the underpinning of the mine-owner.

"With those legs, daddy-prospective? Oh, go 'way! you're pouring an evaporated distillation of sorghum into my auricular appendages! You couldn't kick one—"

If he was not very big, Marcus Tudor lacked no pluck, for he leaped at the throat of the insolent gambler with a fury that resembled that shown by a toy terrier who fancied himself insulted by the very size of a passing mastiff. And with much the same coolness did Faro Saul receive his assault.

A swift motion of his left arm brushed aside the blows aimed at his head, and then—just how it was performed, Marcus Tudor could never explain, even to himself—the irate mine-owner was transported across the room and seated once more in his chair. And the Hercules reoccupied his own seat, smoking placidly, smiling lazily, cool and insolent as ever.

For a brief space there was silence between them. Then, having recovered his breath and a portion of his usual calmness and clearness of wit, Marcus Tudor spoke:

"Allow me to ask one question: are you crazy, or only drunk, Mr. Oberlin?"

"Neither the one nor the other," was the prompt reply, as the gambler flung his cigar out at the open window and drew his magnificent figure erect, all traces of laziness vanishing as though by magic. "Instead I'm a man of business, and I expect you to meet me on that platform."

"Very well," was the deliberate response.

"As a man of business, you must expect to hear the truth occasionally, even though a little of the customary veneer of politeness be brushed off."

"Oh, I'm not overly thin-skinned, to kick at a flea-bite. Make no apologies on my account, I beg of you."

"I will not, sadly as your recent conduct needs them," was the quick retort. "You have acted the part of a drunken ruffian; or, else that of a crack-brained ass, I have not yet fully decided which. Unfortunately for outraged decency, you have but recently been of service to my daughter, thus obliging me to endure much more than a gentleman otherwise could bear. But if you have an atom of common sense remaining, you will bear in mind that there is a limit to human endurance. Have I spoken with sufficient plainness, Mister Oberlin?"

"Like an oracle, or a poll-parrot, my dear sir; take your choice," was the careless reply.

"I will," with sudden heat. "I choose to be left alone. Yonder is the door through which you entered. Good-day, sir!"

"Well, yes; the day's good enough for me, though I have experienced cooler ones in my time."

"Will you go? Or must I—"

"You certainly must—clap a stopper on that toy volcano of yours, and listen to me. Sit down."

Sharp and decisively as Faro Saul spoke, his actions were equally prompt. With one stride he was beside the angry mine-owner, one hand pressing him back into the chair, while the other, with extended and quivering forefinger, moved back and forth before the little man's face, keeping time to the words which fell from the lips of the gambler.

"You have had your say, so now listen to mine. I mean business, clear down to bed-rock. I gave you the opportunity to do the graceful and prove yourself a parent such as we read about—in the Ledger—and thus entitle yourself to a double dose of red-fire and applause. But you wouldn't accept your cue. You kicked over the traces, and violated all precedents. You admitted that I rescued your only daughter from outrage, if not death, but when I put in a claim for the hand to which, in justice, my services entitled me, you kicked worse than a balky mule with a burr under its tail."

Again that mocking drawl, as Saul relaxed his grasp and fell back a pace, his face assuming an expression of injured dignity, flatly belied by the dancing devil in his eyes.

Marcus Tudor stared into his face, once more puzzled and unable to say whether this fellow was mad or simply drunk. He surely could not be in his usual senses, or—

"Don't be mealy-mouthed, daddy. Spit it out."

"I will. Be you drunk, crazy or simply possessed of the devil?" demanded Tudor, with forced calmness in his tones, though his eyes were blazing with inward passion. "You have said and done enough to cancel a thousand times

over any service which you may have rendered me or mine, and now I will tear off the gloves and curry you, bare-handed."

"Take me the way of the fur, then, unless you want to get a handful of hairs in your throat, daddy."

"You are a gambler, a common blackleg, who lives off the weaknesses of mankind. You are a common cheat; one who would cheat a blind grandfather of his last dollar. You are a wild and woolly fire-eater, depending more on your great bulk to awe your victims into swallowing their losses, rather than your courage or nerve. Bah!"

"Good enough, as far as you go; but you stop too soon, my dear sir," coolly drawled the Hercules, showing not the faintest sign of resentment at this decidedly plain language. "In addition to all that, I am a speculator, whose stock in trade consists of the secrets and weaknesses of my fellow-men—one of whom you are most decidedly which."

"You jeer at romance—all right. I'll come down to flat business, and see how much better you like that," Faro Saul added, with another abrupt change in voice and manner.

"Spare yourself that trouble; I've listened to your infernal nonsense too long as it is. Once more, there's the door; will you have the common decency to take your departure?"

Very quietly the mine-owner spoke, but there was something in his tones that told how hard was the task of holding his hot passions in check, how gladly he would have kicked the giant across his threshold had the power been given him.

Faro Saul could not help noticing this, and his lip curled with a peculiar satisfaction as he did so. Until now Marcus Tudor had held himself so proudly aloof—had never yet deigned to recognize, by word, nod or glance, the man of cards—that even this negative sort of revenge was very sweet.

"When I have fully emptied my budget, dear sir; until then you really must bear with me. Unless, indeed, you are determined to sweep me out with your own broom, unaided."

Marcus Tudor flushed hotly at the covert sneer in these words, for he fully comprehended how impotent was his strength against the giant before him.

"You shall answer for all this, you scoundrel!"

"When, where and how you choose, my dear fellow; but business before pleasure. Allow me to expatiate, please."

"The fact is, I am growing old—I discovered a gray hair in my pate this morning; I did, actually! And growing aged, I naturally begin to think about settling down in life. I begin to feel the need of a loving wife—if only to pull off my boots when I come home chock-full of coffin varnish and insist on turning in with all sails set."

"I pledge you my honor, Tudor, these very reflections were revolving in my cabeza this afternoon when I strolled out of town, taking my constitutional. I had just arrived at the tender wife part of the day-dream, when I chanced to see Toby Tinker with your daughter—though I did not immediately recognize her—foul. And I give you the self-same pledge that I out gun and downed him without a thought of an after reward; that came into existence when I held the dainty little blossom in my arms, her fair face reclining against my manly bosom, and—but pardon me, I believe you object to romance?"

It was a bitter test of endurance, to sit still and listen to those words, to meet that mocking glance; but Marcus Tudor was enabled to do so. What other course lay open to him? Single-handed, unarmed, he was like an infant in comparison with that athlete. He grated his teeth together and waited.

"Well, we'll leave all that to your imagination when it wakes up, then," said Saul, with an off-hand gesture as though brushing the reminiscence aside. "I'll not nauseate you with describing how Dan Cupid jammed my heart chuck-full of porcupine-quills, but simply state that then and there I became convinced I was growing old, and *did* require the care of a loving wife. And when your charming daughter opened her eyes; when she thanked me in that charming voice of hers; when she begged of me to forget that I was nothing more than a gambler—to only remember that I was a god-like hero in her eyes—and ended by begging me to bear her company to her home, where her noble papa—meaning *you*, my dear sir!—would fling his arms about my neck and take all the starch out of my shirt-bosom with his grateful tears; why, then I felt ten times over the detestable dreariness of a single life!"

"Well, I obeyed the dainty darling. I brought her safely home, and meekly prepared to receive your tears, your blessing, your generous gift of her hand for having saved her wind; but I didn't get either—not any! Just what I did receive, you may possibly remember."

"You were treated as a gentleman, until you showed yourself an insolent scoundrel!" sternly cried Marcus Tudor.

"According to your say-so; but I believe it is

my innings just now. Being such a perfect gentleman yourself, of course you will not interrupt me while talking," smiled the black-leg, showing his white teeth maliciously.

"It happens to be the case that I am one who never gives up his grip when it is once fastened on anything; in that respect I can give the bulkiest bulldog points and beat him. For that reason, your ungrateful conduct only served to deepen my conviction that in Miss Zurilla I had met my everlasting fate."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, I mean to marry her, whether you give your consent or not. Of course, if not too much trouble, I would like to have your good-will and blessing on our union, but the wife is the most important part of the marriage ceremony, in my humble estimation."

"You see, I do not mince my words. I state the case as plainly as possible. If you had proven yourself a gentleman of the old school, I would have flung in the frills and pretty talk without end. But you're a man of business. All such unnecessary trimmings are worse than wasted breath in your estimation; and I'm mighty glad of it, too! Saves a heap of wear and tear of the tongue!"

"Are you done?" asked Tudor, as the Sport Hercules paused.

"Not quite, thank you," with a bow of mock politeness. "Bide a wee, my dear dad, and then you shall have free fling, while I play the part of attentive audience."

"When you have taken time to look over the situation as it will be, you can't help seeing what an admirable arrangement it will prove, to all parties concerned. I'll get a wife equal in beauty and style to the next one, no matter where she hails from. She will get a husband about as big and good-looking as they make 'em, if I do say it myself. And you—well, it will be the making of you, man alive! No more tugging out dirty rocks to turn into gold; we'll let others do that, while we rake in the ducats after they are coined and before they have had time to grow soiled and dingy."

"I can handle the pasteboards better than the man who first invented them. You—especially when you sport a long-horn collar, bald-faced shirt and white choker, as now—would make the finest stool-pigeon in a day's run by telegraph! The best of 'em couldn't resist you! And when you roped them in, pretty Zu could dazzle their senses while I attended strictly to business and turned their weasel-skins wrong side out! Why man, it would be glorious! We could skin the whole United States in a year, and make enough to pay off the National Debt out of the scrapings of our pockets!"

This was more than mortal flesh and blood could bear, and with a husky cry, Marcus Tudor leaped up and struck with his clinched fist at the face of the mocking villain.

"I'll kill you! I'll tear your insolent tongue out and cram it down your vile throat!" he grated, fairly maddened.

But Saul avoided the blow and caught the infuriated mine-owner in his powerful arms, forcing him back into his chair again, saying sternly, all traces of mockery gone:

"Sit down and behave yourself, or I'll sit on you! Enough of trifling. Plain talk now, and, mind you, it is sworn to. I've taken a strong fancy to that daughter of yours, and mean to make her my wife."

"I'd rather see her dead and in her grave, ten thousand times over!" grated Tudor, vainly striving to free himself from that grip of steel.

A hard, cutting laugh parted those red lips, and holding the mine-owner as helpless as though he was laden with heavy irons from head to foot, Faro Saul released one hand, shaking a finger in his prisoner's face to lend emphasis to his words as he deliberately retorted:

"Your daughter will see you dancing on a tight-rope first, with the noose around your throat and nothing but air beneath your feet, *Waldo St. John!*"

What was there in that name to blanch the cheeks of the florid mine-owner, and cause that wild, hunted look to fill his starting eyes? Yet thus it acted, and with a short, hard laugh, the gambler released his adversary, gazing at him maliciously.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GRIP OF STEEL.

It was as though some one had dealt Marcus Tudor a blow sufficient to temporarily paralyze his bodily powers, while leaving his brain as active as ever. Though that grip of steel had left him, and Saul stood with folded arms a few feet distant, regarding him with that peculiar, half-mocking, half-threatening expression on his face and in his dark eyes, the mine-owner reclined in his chair, limp and nerveless, only the wild, hunted look in his starting eyes telling how sharply that last dart of the gambler's had stung him.

Faro Saul seemed thoroughly satisfied with the result of the experiment, as far as it had gone, and after a brief space, he returned to the seat he had recently vacated. This movement on his part broke the stupefying spell which had

fallen upon the mine-owner, and with a start, he hoarsely gasped:

"Who are you? Man or devil?"

"One who is thoroughly acquainted with your past history and can hang you by a simple turn of the wrist."

Swift and sharp though the answer came, the interval it consumed gave Marcus Tudor time to rally in a certain degree, though the effort he was obliged to make could not have escaped the notice of a much less wide-awake watcher than the one whose jettv eyes drank in every light and shade which fought for possession of that unnaturally pale countenance.

"You lie, you graceless villain! You lie in your teeth!" he hoarsely uttered, the great veins swelling on his temples until it seemed as though only the bursting of conduits could preserve him from an apoplectic stroke.

"Don't make me prove it, my dear fellow," retorted Faro Saul, with a light laugh that sounded far more relentless than if it had been a brutal curse. "I'd far rather make the fair Zurilla a wife than an orphan, but if you crowd me out of the smooth and flowery path into tangled and thorny trails, don't blame me if black crape come into use before wedding favors!"

"The precious little pet might take a contrary view of the matter—might even think I was to blame for the mishap which overtook you—and a pouting bride with a red nose and tear-marked cheeks, would be just a bit of a bore! On the whole, therefore, I beg of you, daddy dear, not to make me press this point to the gallows!"

"You can't—it's all a base lie—a lie black and foul as your own devil's heart!"

"All a lie, is it?" sneeringly. "Your name is not Waldo St. John? You are not an Englishman, born and raised in London? You did not flee from there in hot haste, with red blood dyeing your hands crimson?"

A convulsive shudder agitated the frame of the mine-owner. His face turned ghastly pale, and with a low, husky moan, he buried his face in his trembling palms.

Saul again showed his white teeth beneath his pointed mustaches, his eyes filled with an almost satanic glee as he saw how nearly his triumph was complete. Marcus Tudor was crushed almost to the earth, and a few more such bitter blows would kill or drive him insane.

But the big sport was not a man to kill the bird from which he confidently expected to receive a liberal supply of golden eggs, and he dropped his fierce, domineering tone for one more gentle, as though he was addressing a man and an equal, rather than a guilty inferior.

"I don't want to bear too hard on you, Mr. Tudor. I would not have uncovered the black past at all, had I seen the remotest hope of gaining my ends by less disagreeable means. But you shut off all hope there. You looked on me as one so far below your level that it would be impossible for you to stoop so low as to wipe your soiled shoes on my carcass. Very creditable in you, no doubt, but as I couldn't sprout wings to rise to your station, there was nothing left for me but to drag you down to the lower level."

"I have given you a good deal of empty wind since our interview began, but now I am talking in sober earnest, and all I say goes as it lays. I really love your daughter, and will make her a far better husband than the big majority of those whom you would term strictly honest and pious men, if only because I have so long held the inside track of wickedness and trickery, that I can the better appreciate one who is pure, truthful, honest and clean-souled."

"I have loved her ever since our first meeting, though for a long time it was like a crippled glow-worm worshiping the full moon, for I never expected the time would come when I would see her fairly within my reach. The mere sight of her pure face made me a better man, though you may not believe even this much."

Oberlin paused, a look upon his face as though he expected Marcus Tudor to say something at this point; but if so, he was disappointed. The mine-owner lowered his hands, but did not lift his haggard face, staring at vacancy, seemingly half-stupefied.

With a frown, Saul rose, stepped forward and tapped his victim on the shoulder, speaking sharply as the mine-owner lifted his eyes:

"Do you hear me? Can you comprehend what I am saying, Waldo St. John?"

"St. John is dead—murdered!" muttered the man, passing one hand across his forehead as though to brush away a troublesome mist; then crying, with a flash of energy: "Why do you call me by that name? I am Marcus Tudor, and you—"

"Your very humble servant, to command," laughed the blackleg, as he fell back to his seat once more, evidently satisfied with having roused his victim to a sense of the present. "Faro Saul, the Giant Gambler—the Handsome Hercules—men sometimes call me. Saul Oberlin, Esquire, son-in-law of the millionaire speculator and mining king, they will call me in the days to come, if you listen to reason. If not—well, many a better man has had occasion to carry a noosed rope on his secret coat-of-arms!"

"If there is a particle of manhood in your composition, leave me!" hoarsely uttered Marcus Tudor, rallying all his strength of mind and body. "I am ill; you are taking a shameful advantage of an old man, whose strength has been severely shaken by the peril of his only child. Go, and come with your ridiculous tale of romance when I am better able to endure your idle babble."

A short, hard, contemptuous laugh broke from the lips of the giant sport.

"You forget, my dear sir, that you are talking to a professional gambler. It is a rule with our craft to never quit a winning game while the one we're bucking against has a card, or a ducat left to lose. I'd be a pretty idiot, wouldn't I, to draw off my forces just when you are on the point of capitulating? No, no, daddy dear; there's no time like the present."

For all he spoke in such a careless tone, Faro Saul was in deadly earnest, and Marcus Tudor could see as much. And he rallied his shaken powers as well as he could to meet the ordeal which he well knew would be severe, indeed.

"Then say what you have to say in as few words as possible. It will take a week's time and a whole drug store to fumigate this room, as it is."

Faro Saul smiled at this little spiteful outburst, but then his face grew grave, his deep voice earnest.

"You may not believe it, first off, Mr. Tudor, but your daughter might do far worse than to marry me. I will abandon my present mode of life for her sake, and settle down as a reputable and respectable member of society. My blood is at least equal to your own; and far away from here there will be none who can point the finger at either of us."

"Am I to understand this as a proposal for my daughter's hand?" coldly asked the mine-owner.

"If you please," bowed the gambler.

"Then I must respectfully but positively decline the honor of the alliance you offer. Good-afternoon, sir!"

In spite of the hot flush which suffused his countenance, Saul broke into a low laugh, for there was something grimly comical in this ceremonious interchange of sentences after what had already passed between the twain.

"Pardon me, my dear sir," he said, with an elaborate bow. "I meant to have coughed instead of laughing, but my emotions got the better of me, and I made a slight mistake. As I was saying, promise me by all you hold sacred on earth or in Heaven, that you will bestow the hand of your daughter Zurilla on me in marriage, and the whole past shall be buried so deep that not even the resurrection shall bring it to light again! I will destroy all the proofs of your past crime, and from the happy hour in which I shall have the legal right to call you father-in-law, the shadow of the scaffold shall pass away from your path in life forever. Is it a bargain?"

"I don't understand, you, sir," coldly uttered Tudor. "If you are neither drunk nor crazy, then you must have made a shameful blunder, taking me for another man."

"You don't say so?" with a low, mocking laugh.

The enforced composure of the mine-owner gave way at this, and in hot anger he cried:

"Leave this house, you low, insulting cur, or I'll forget that I am an old man, and kick you out!"

"Now I wouldn't, if I were you, really!" drawled the giant, as he leaned back in his chair and bit the tip off another cigar. "It mightn't be healthy. I fear you would find it a severe strain on your muscles. Sit down, you!" with a sudden change of voice as the mine-owner started from his seat. "You have tried those tactics often enough. The next time I'll lay you across my knee and awaken the memories of your school-boy days after a fashion far from agreeable!"

"I'll have your life blood for this, you heartless scoundrel!"

"Better wait until you have settled for the life-blood spilled across the sea, my fine fellow!"

"It is false—false as hell itself!"

"What I say I am amply prepared to prove," coolly retorted the giant sport. "I can prove that your name is not Marcus Tudor—that it is Waldo St. John—that you lived in London, where you married a woman by the name of Althea Pennoyer—that you fled from London one night; I can give the precise date, when necessary; with your hands stained with blood! Dare you deny this?"

Already the feeble flash of angry independence had vanished, and Marcus Tudor cowered once more beneath those sharp, stern sentences. And as the gambler paused with that sneering query, the stricken mine-owner muttered huskily:

"I was fully justified in—"

"Justified in butchering a woman? And that woman your lawfully wedded wife? What would the fair Zurilla say were she to learn of this charge and your whining plea?"

There was no reply to this taunt. Marcus Tudor drooped his head still lower, his face ghastly and contorted, his hands trembling, his

whole attitude that of a guilty, unmanned wretch.

"It rests with you, my dear sir," added Saul, once more in his habitually smooth, even tones, "whether or no she ever learns the true history of your past crimes. Unless you oblige me to handle sharp weapons, your secret is safe in my keeping."

"It is true, I am a gambler, and therefore one who has but slight mercy on those who find themselves arrayed on the opposite side of the lay-out; but I never yet run a man down to his last stake without giving him ample time to study out his best method of planting his forlorn hope. I will not break my rule in dealing with you now. I will grant you two days in which to think over the matter, to weigh the situation, and decide on your course of action. During that time you shall be left free as air, save that should you attempt to take leg bail and give me the slip, you will be dropped on, heavy!"

"At the expiration of the period of grace, I will return, expecting to receive your final decision. But to aid you in making up your mind, let me add this much: I will bring with me irrefragable proofs of all that I charge against you. I will have in readiness witnesses who can swear to your identity as Waldo St. John; to the crime which startled all London; to your prime agency in that tragedy; in short, everything necessary to tear down the veil you have been so careful in keeping closed over your past life."

"Spare me—I am ill—I am not fit to—to—"

Faintly, chokingly came the words, uttered by one who was hardly conscious of what he said. Just then Marcus Tudor looked so much like a dying man, that his tormentor sprang across the room to the open sideboard, and pouring out a full glass of brandy, returned, lifting the drooping head of his victim, gently but firmly forcing him to swallow the potent liquor.

It apparently effected its intended purpose, for with a strangling cough, Marcus Tudor pushed the gambler away, a little of the old fire glowing in his bloodshot eyes.

"It's all a lie! I deny your foul assertions, sir! You shall hear from me, sir, after a fashion—will you begone?"

It was evident that his brain was still not a little confused by what he had been called on to undergo during that long hour, but Saul drew a deep breath of relief as that sudden fear fled from his mind. The stake for which he was playing was too large to be lost just when his fingers were on the point of touching it; yet for a few moments he believed death had come to dash his hopes to the ground.

"Yes, I will begone, as soon as I am satisfied that you fully understand the conditions," he added, speaking very distinctly, so that the bewildered mine-owner might the better follow his words. "Look the situation over, and study out the wisest course for you to pursue. You can take your choice of two: one ends at the gallows, the other in a peaceful old age, surrounded by happy grandchildren. For two days I will leave you alone. At the end of that time I will come for your decision, prepared for either peace or war. You understand?"

"Anything—just so you rid me of your cursed presence now!" muttered the mine-owner huskily.

"All right; I'll *puckachee*," donning his hat and moving toward the window which extended from ceiling to floor; but, as he gained this, holding the swinging sash in his hand, Saul partially turned to fling over his shoulder:

"By the way, I came near forgetting one important point. It may be just as well for you to put the kibosh on that proposed match between Zurilla and your foreman."

"I don't understand," faltered Marcus Tudor.

"Don't lie," was the brutal retort. "Your wits are quite keen enough when you care to exercise them. I mean that you want to break off all connection between my promised bride and that Milo Vincent. If not—well, the day they wed, or their engagement is announced, I'll twist the hangman's noose around that precious throttle of yours!"

Even as the last words parted his lips, the door swung open, and Zurilla, pale, her eyes widely distended, filled with a wondering, horrified light, entered the room!

The gambler turned pale as he saw that his brutal threat must have been overheard by the maiden, but then his native audacity returned, and doffing his hat with a low bow, he uttered:

"Sorry I am too busy to explain, my dear, but if you wish to learn just what is on the docket, question your worthy papa, yonder. Until day after to-morrow, *adios*, my pretty bride!"

With a low, mellow laugh, the giant sport stepped through the window and strode swiftly away toward town, leaving one greatly surprised and one utterly miserable soul behind him.

Zurilla, scarce able to believe the evidence of her own senses, turned toward her father for an explanation of the mystery, but as she noted his ghastly face, a wild cry parted her lips. Kneeling beside him, she tried to lift his head.

It was nerveless, heavy as lead, and with a terrible fear tearing at her heart-strings, she shrieked aloud for help.

But not a sound came from those ashen lips, even when her warm ones were pressed frantically to them.

CHAPTER IX.

A BLUSHING HERO'S OVATION.

BUT as he turned his broad back to the house where he had left one crushed and benumbed victim to his grip of steel, the mocking smile fled from the face of Saul Oberlin, a dark frown of mingled chagrin and uneasiness taking its place.

"Curse the luck! there must always be one crooked card in the deal! How long had that girl been listening at the keyhole before she popped in on us? I wanted to keep her in the dark as long as possible—forever, if that pig-headed fool would permit!"

He turned the pointed ends of his mustaches into his mouth, gnawing at them savagely as he strode rapidly along, his otherwise handsome face being anything but a pleasant sight to gaze upon just at the moment.

The game he was playing, was one the Handsome Hercules had carefully conned, noting each possible point and providing against one and all until his position seemed absolutely impregnable. And up to the instant when he caught that half-frightened, half-scornful look upon the face of Zurilla Tudor as she stood framed against the background of the darkened hall, he had never for a moment allowed himself to think of defeat. But now, he was not nearly so certain.

"There's a bit of the devil in her composition, for all she seems so meek and gentle, and if she once takes the bit in her teeth, she'll care precious little who goes to ruin in the general smash-up! If I knew how long she had stood there listening!"

That was the point that gave the big gambler the most uneasiness. If Zurilla had heard naught save his closing sentence, it would matter but little, though he knew that his original intention of for a time, at least, playing the role of a proudly humble suitor must be abandoned. But if she had caught even a portion of the outline he gave of that hasty flight from London and consequent change of name, he knew the nature of women well enough to feel sure Zurilla would never give over until she had learned all.

"And then the silly little goose would be just mule enough to defy me and brace the old man up to fight me tooth and toe-nail. I've got him foul, he can't get his neck out of the noose, let him fight never so vigorously, but that ain't what I want. Booty and beauty—I've had a polite sufficiency of blood in my time!"

Wholly preoccupied and filled with his evil schemes, the giant paid no particular attention to his footsteps, unconsciously taking a turn that led him to the left of the mining-camp, though its curving shape kept him at about the same distance from the main portion of the town. And it was only when the sharp clatter of hoofs and the rattle of rapidly revolving wheels on a particularly rocky portion of ground on the distant hillside smote upon the ear, that Saul came back to the present. One glance showed him the outlines of the coach from Upper Ten through a cloud of dust, and turning on his heel, he swiftly strode away, taking a short cut to the main street.

With a face that glowed as brightly as the setting sun, Don Bobtail Fandango tooled his "hearse"—now really deserving that popular title—along, "slinging on more style than a country stud-hoss," as one of his envious rivals muttered, in disgusted tones, when the stage first came in sight.

The arrival of the stage, if only because their mail came by that conveyance, was always an event of decided interest to the average digger, and there was always a crowd to witness its arrival. On this day, the group was double the ordinary size, for Don Bob was full two hours late, and knowing as they did how proud the fat little driver was of keeping strictly schedule time, there were many who predicted an accident of some sort had happened to detain the stage.

Don Bobtail Fandango saw the crowd, and his great big heart swelled so that it fairly lifted him off his seat in his struggle to keep it from jumping clear out at his mouth. Never lived there a prouder mortal than he; never another man had so much trouble in choking a wild howl of triumph at this perfect realization of his scoffed-at predictions; but Don Bob was made of no ordinary material, and proved himself equal to the occasion.

With his rotund figure drawn as erect as nature would permit, with head thrown back from his squared shoulders and ruby red nose scornfully uplifted, with foot on brake and lines taut, the slender whip carefully crossed at right angles, down came the hearse at regulation speed, rounding to with a dexterous curve at the precise spot selected.

But the usual cheers from the spectators did not greet this feat. Instead, they stood in open-mouthed astonishment, staring at the motionless

figures with which the top of the stage was laden. And well they might, for not only did fresh blood mark the garments worn, but a dozen little rills had flowed from beneath the ghastly mass and trickled down the sides of the coach.

"Whooray fer Good Enough!" suddenly yelled Don Bobtail, leaping to his feet and tossing his battered hat high into the air as he found it impossible to longer repress his swelling pride. "This day she gits her 'jority, an' kin vote without any dirty galoot darin' fer to say black is the white o' her eye. Who sais we ain't a full-blown city? Who wants to spit out a slur ag'in' the Queen Bee o' the Foothills? Who wants fer to hint at dead duck, er any sech low-down didoes? Who? Trot him out, an' ef Don Bob don't ram-jam the howlin' lie an' stinkin' slander down his gullet so fur it'll crowd his boots off, then I want to be a hunk o' gum fer an' old maid's horsepittle!"

In his glorious excitement Don Bob forgot where he was; and as he ended, he made one proud prance too many, stepping over the end of the footboard and plunging downward with a wild yell, that ended in a sonorous grunt. Fortunately for his valuable neck, his fall was broken by the miners who flocked around the coach to view the ghastly load on its top, and Don Bob, resolved not to be cheated out of one iota of his glory, scrambled back to his perch, spluttering:

"Gents an' feller-citizens! len' me your ears, an' ef I don't fill 'em chuck-full o' somethin' that knocks the socks o' o' taffy on a rag, then I don't want a cent!"

"Augh! bite it off, an' give us the essence in one swallow!" cried one irreverent wretch, whose impatience blinded him to the rights of the worthy Don Bob.

"If it's one swallow that'll satisfy the likes o' you, Dab-chick, the sooner you send for a priest to shrive you the easier your friends 'll rest this night, for sure the change is so sudden an' mighty that you'll never see the sun rise ag'in, so you won't, honey!" retorted Don Bob. "Stow a mule in that ugly tunnel o' yours, an' listen while your betters talk!"

"Gents, all! Here you see a hull circus on a band-waggin, with the ring-master an' the clown inside! In the 'mortal languid of some feller or other: we come, we saw, an' here we be, with more cold meat than you kin shake a stick at! All tuck in honest, up-an'-down fightin' by—Thar's one o' the blushin' heroes, now!" he abruptly spluttered, as the door of the coach opened and Milo Vincent stepped to the ground.

The face of the handsome foreman was pale where it showed through the stains of dust and dried blood, which, with his torn and disordered garments, plainly spoke of rough work. He cast a swift glance over the crowd, and his blue eyes filled with a vivid light as he met one pair of dark eyes amid the gathering.

At the sight of his familiar figure and face, a low murmur rose, and a dozen voices were uplifted in eager questions, while the crowd pushed and swayed, each one desiring to better his position for hearing and seeing. But all was still when Milo Vincent uplifted a hand, motioning impatiently.

"Gentlemen, if you will allow me, I'll explain briefly. We were held up by a gang of road-agents, at the foot of Crooked Elbow Pass, and after a little powder-burning we came on in fair order. How the road-agents fared, you can guess from the sign on top of the stage. Only one—the chief—got away.

"You know who I am. You know that I am responsible for what I say. I pledge you my word of honor as a man that we had to kill or be killed. You will meet with a serious surprise when you come to examine the bodies of the dead, and may have hard feelings toward those who killed them; but remember that they were seeking to plunder and slay—that they were all securely masked, so that an own brother could not have recognized them.

"Wait a bit," he added, hastily, as several of the party seemed about to scale the sides of the coach. "I will pay all costs of giving the dead proper burial, if any or all of them are not claimed by friends. And, in conclusion, permit me to add that I am ready at any time to give any further explanation which may be deemed essential."

With a low bow, Milo Vincent turned away and pushed his way through the excited crowd. But he paused where, himself unseen, he could command both a view of the stage door and the darkly handsome face of the giant gambler, Faro Saul.

Old Pap Weatherwax emerged from the coach, then with elaborate politeness the ancient assisted Miss Sella Timberlake to alight. Eagerly the eyes of Milo Vincent flashed from the closely-veiled figure to the face of Faro Saul; but if he expected to catch any token of recognition passing between the two, he was doomed to disappointment.

He watched until Miss Timberlake entered the hotel, then he strode away in the direction of Marcus Tudor's house, as he went muttering beneath his voice:

"Can I have made a mistake? Have I

wronged her? It seems so; and yet, I could have taken my solemn oath she was none other than Queen Titania, made up for the occasion!"

Never since the first blow of pick sent its echo through the valley where Good Enough now stood in all its glory, had that sterling mining-camp a sensation equal to this.

One by one the masked bodies were lowered to the ground and carried into the long dining-room of the hotel, careless of the fact that supper was just on the point of being spread. Dishes and viands were ruthlessly brushed aside and the dead men were ranged in a ghostly line on the tables. Then, and not until then, were the masks removed and any effort made to penetrate their disguise.

This was mainly due to the superhuman efforts of Don Bob, who, by dint of putting himself prominently forward, and his oft-repeated pledge to act as lecturer and paint the whole panorama as it occurred, was suffered to carry the affair out in accordance with his idea of fitness. And then, when the dead men were decently ranged on the table, he marshaled the eager citizens, and imploring each man to keep his place in the line and observe common decency, he hastily removed the masks and gave the word for the march to commence.

For a few moments all went well, and the proud little driver fairly swelled with pride and dignity, as he stood by, regulating the rate of progress; but when the wild cries and startled exclamations of those who recognized the features of the dead men broke out, all order was flung to the winds. A mad stampede was made by the citizens. Don Bob was rudely hustled aside and thrown down, to be kicked and trod on during that insane scramble.

Not one of the seven dead men but what were known to all who looked upon them, and amid the exclamations of surprise and marvel, arose wilder cries—the surging rage and grief of relatives or bosom companions. And more than once there could be heard fierce threats of revenge—of wilder charges of conspiracy and foul murder done on innocent beings; but these as quickly died away.

The sympathies of the large majority were with the slayers, and prudence taught the mourners to say as little as might be, lest the dreaded cry of lynch law should be rained against them.

One by one the bodies were claimed and carried away by those who were best entitled to care for them, and with each departure the atmosphere seemed to grow clearer. At length only one corpse remained unclaimed, though it was recognized by all, and openly asserted that Good Enough contained a brother to the deceased.

By this time the excitement had partially worn its wire edge off, and the body was carried into the saloon to make way for the long-delayed supper. Placed on a card-table, an old coat was flung over the ghastly face, and before long its very presence was forgotten.

During the wild hubbub, Epaphroditus Weatherwax kept himself pretty well under cover, for, as a stranger in Good Enough, he was far from certain how his recent exploits as a knight of the pestle and pill-box might be received.

But as the evening grew along, and Don Bobtail, having soothed his many bruises by plentiful applications of whisky, inwardly applied, repeated for the dozenth time his thrilling tale of the attack, the skirmish, the battle and victory, painting in lurid colors the doughty deeds of the two champions, there was a general call for Weatherwax. Gingerly enough, that blushing hero put in an appearance, though it was for a time doubtful which he would do: face the music, or take a flying leap through the window and make a break "for tall timber."

But the enthusiastic reception he received soon set all his doubts at rest, and faithfully punishing the glasses of liquor which were pressed upon him from all sides, the ancient set his nimble tongue at liberty.

From that moment poor Don Bob was forced to hide his diminished head and chew his thumb-nails in speechless envy, for his poor tongue and fat-laden wits could not begin to keep pace with the spread-eagle flights of that double-binged word-machine. No longer blushing—unless it might be with the peculiar glow born of liquid lightning—no more the meek and doubting hero, Old Pap Weatherwax gave a complete history of all that was done on that bloody field of battle by himself, by each one of the others, both friends and foes, and even explained just what each individual thought and felt as well as said or did.

Truly, when the whisky is in, gas will out! "An' thar ye hev it, gents an' feller-citizens, straight as a string an' true as the Book o' Revelations! They come, an' they tackled us, an' they got jes' everlastin'ly basted with hot powder an' cold lead! They come onto us strangers, an' we tuck 'em in, 'cordin' to the law an' gospel. But the fun was over afore it begun. They wasn't nough o' the black-avised critters fer to make us one little mouthful! We wouldn't 'a' tackled 'em at all, only we think

they hed a few hundreds more o' the same sort, c'alled out in the bresh, waitin' to come for'ard when we got our teeth set on aidge with the fu'st batch. An' that's what made the ole man 'shamed fer to face ye fu'st off. It looked so durned little in a hullsawle road-agent 'nihilator fer to be braggin' over takin' in a measly pore hafe dozen o' the imps—it did so!"

Old Pap Weatherwax paused to catch his breath and empty another glass which one of the enthusiastic citizens was urging upon him, and as a feeble sort of forlorn hope, Don Bobtail Fandango chimed in:

"Hope may die ef 'tain't mostly as he sais, gents! Never in the hull course o' my parsonal exper'ence, hev I see'd his ekil fer git up an' lay right down to it strategy an' pure grit—never! Why, would you think it, feller-citizens o' the slam-bang-up-est city this side o' paradise! When the road-agents fu'st belched out 'han's up,' 'cordin' to rule, what does he do, this honorable gent from the top notch? Plays 'em fer suckers, he did, gents—hope may die!"

In his burning desire to regain his laurels as a fluent and dramatic speaker, Don Bob almost lost his last opportunity, for the wily old hero began to suspect what was in the wind, and with a dignified wave of the hand, said:

"Let that flea stick by the wall, my noble fri'nd! 'Nough is better'n a feast, an' these gents hes hed a perlite sufficiency—full o' the ole man an' his explytes fer once."

But some of the crowd began to suspect that more lay behind than had as yet been told, and laughingly urged Don Bob on. He was nothing loth to comply, as may readily be guessed.

"Ef he didn't, gents, I'm a howlin' liar, an' I kin lick ary galoot as looks crossways at the statement, too! What did the great road-agent 'nihilator do, I ax once more? An' echo whoops 'er up with 'Hid body an' britches onder the seat inside, the better to save—I mean *catch* the p'izen critters in a trap! That's what echo sais, gents, all, an' devil a lie!"

"S'pose I did?" indignantly cried the ancient, amid a chorus of laughter. "S'pose a sudden sit o' fickness did grab me whar I lived an' chuck me onder the seat? Didn't I come out ag'in? An' didn't I jes' rake them persimmons from taw?"

The presence of the corpse of the road-agent was forgotten by all that merry crowd gathered before the bar, but there was one man left in Good Enough who had a better memory. And while the two oddities were disputing might and main, a rough-clad, burly fellow stole into the saloon unobserved and strode to where the silent figure lay with hidden face.

With a hand that trembled like a leaf, he lifted the coat and took one long, mad look at the bullet-marked face. Then the cloth dropped to the floor, and his bloodshot eyes flashed toward the laughing crowd. If ever there was death in human eyes, then death, sudden and merciless, glared from those evil orbs as their owner heard the last boast of the old man.

"For all I'm subjec' to the p'izen spells, didn't I rekever in good time, an' didn't I snipe 'em in when the ball opened? Whar's the man that'll say I didn't?"

"You jes' did, ole pard," cordially replied Don Bobtail, his short-lived envy vanishing before the memory of the glorious deeds which had at last set the sign manual of city on the alabaster brow of his beloved Good Enough. "Ef the dead could speak, thar lays one who could thunder out in mighty accents, *You jes' bet your boots on—GOOD LAWD!*"

He turned to point a finger at the corpse, but started back as he saw the gaunt figure beside it.

"My brother Jim—who killed him?" snarled the man beside the corpse, whipping out a revolver as he spoke.

Instinctively the crowd parted, leaving Old Pap alone, and as he turned sharply, the revolver rose and exploded.

Without a cry or moan, Epaphroditus Weatherwax plunged forward to the floor, with a dull, heavy thud!

CHAPTER X.

A SORELY SHAKEN MAN.

In those first dreadful moments Zurilla believed her father dead—murdered by the man who flung over his shoulder those enigmatical yet plainly insulting words—and as she sunk on her knees beside his chair, her brain reeled and grew dizzy with an awful sickness. But only for a brief space did this weakness last, then, with a desperate effort she recovered her power of action, raising her voice in a sharp cry that brought the fat, sturdy housekeeper to her assistance.

"He's had a stroke, the poor dear!" that astute personage decided the moment she gazed upon his purple, contorted features; but the mere sound of her voice wrought an apparent miracle.

With a desperate effort Marcus Tudor fought off that frightful, suffocating pressure, lifting his head and staring glassily at the woman, as he huskily muttered:

"What want?—didn't call! Get out, Matson!"

The portly housekeeper drew her figure

proudly erect as she stared indignantly into the face of the master who had always treated her with the utmost politeness. Then she turned on her heel and majestically departed from the room, with:

"Well, I do declare!"

"Brandy—drink!" gasped Tudor.

Unhesitatingly Zurilla obeyed this broken command, pouring out a full glass of the strong liquor, and gently supporting the head of the sorely-stricken man until he managed to swallow the potion. Then, with eyes closed, his breathing growing a little more natural, the mine-owner leaned his head against her shoulder.

Though so quiet in outward semblance, Marcus Tudor was fighting a desperate battle within. He was trying to divine how long Zurilla had been within earshot, to judge how much she had learned of that terrible secret which he had fondly believed was forever hidden in the grave of the past. And in ignorance of how plainly his thoughts were imprinted upon his countenance, over the muscles of which his mind had temporarily lost control, or how keenly, breathlessly Zurilla was noting each subtle change, he strove to arrange a plausible fiction by means of which her curiosity might be appeased without her peace of mind being seriously alarmed.

"I am better now," he said, speaking slowly, fighting hard to keep control of his tongue, which felt so curiously thick and unruly. "Call Matson, and I'll lie down for a bit."

"I can assist you, dear," was the gentle response. "You know I am strong. Oh, father!" and the maiden, unable to longer repress her strong emotions, sunk on her knees before him, her tear-wet cheek resting upon his trembling hands as she held them tight clasped between her own; "tell me what this all means? What did that—that man mean? How dare he talk that way to you? What is his power over you?"

"He has none—it is all a foul lie!" muttered Marcus Tudor, with a desperate effort to rally his shattered powers of body and mind. "He's a black-mailer, pet. Forget all you heard, and believe in your poor father."

"I do; nothing can shake my perfect trust in your honor and innocence, dear papa!" was the soothing reply. "But I cannot forget those strange words. How dare that villain order you to send Milo away? to say that all must be at an end between us? He must have been mad, or drunken!"

"Mad—yes!" and Marcus Tudor caught at the suggestion much as a drowning man is said to grasp at a floating straw. "He is a wandering lunatic, full of visionary tales of horror! Why, pet, would you believe it? The rascal actually demanded your hand in marriage! And when I repulsed him in scorn, he had the sublime impudence to threaten me with the gallows! Me, Marcus Tudor—with the common hangman—ha! ha!"

It was a ghastly attempt at a laugh, and Zurilla shuddered and turned a shade paler as she heard it, though she could hardly have explained why she did so. Certain it is that she never once thought of there being a substantial foundation for that threat to rest upon.

"Never mind, dear," she said, soothingly, patting his pale cheek, treating him much as she might an injured child. "We will forget the mean fellow, and only remember how happy we will all be when Milo returns and is here to protect us both from such unmannerly intruders. We will tell him all—"

She paused, amazed and hurt as the mine-owner, with an energy that was almost fury, caught her by the arm and shook it with violence, huskily muttering:

"No, no, not a word! It would be utter ruin! No one must know—it must rest a secret between you and I until I have seen that blood-sucker again and bought him off! Promise me, Zurilla—swear that you will say nothing about—"

Dimly conscious that he had at least in part betrayed the dangerous secret of his past, Marcus Tudor cut his words short, staring almost fiercely into the startled face of his daughter, then drooping his eyes as he saw there full confirmation of his fears.

"Father, you have said too much to pause now," said Zurilla, gravely, her clear eyes holding him as though spellbound. "What does it all mean? What terrible power has that evil man over you? What did he mean by making that preposterous demand, coupled with such a threat?"

Marcus Tudor tried to turn his eyes away from that firm, bright gaze, but in vain. His shaken faculties were incapable of the task and slowly, like one from whom each word is extracted by physical force, he replied:

"He has me in his power. He can—can kill me, if he chooses, and I can do nothing to prevent him, unless—but better shameful death a thousand times over than submit to such an outrageous demand!"

"That you should break off the match between me and Milo, you mean?" hesitatingly asked the maiden. "What made him ask such a thing as that?"

"He said he had loved you ever since he first

beheld you—that he was resolved to marry you himself."

"That gambler?" cried Zurilla, then breaking off suddenly as her ear caught a well-known footstep on the gravel walk.

She ran across the room to the open window, and called:

"Milo! welcome back!"

The next moment she was half-led, half-carried back into the room, then folded in strong arms. A bearded pair of lips fell upon hers, and for a moment or two, all perplexing thoughts and fears were banished to the four winds of heaven.

When Milo Vincent had performed his lovely duties—in this case most welcome ones—and recognized the figure reclining in the easy-chair, he advanced, one arm wound lovingly about the waist of his promised bride, the other holding forth a flat package.

"Back again, my dear sir, and glad I am to hand you this little bundle."

"The money? You had no difficulty in obtaining it?" asked Marcus Tudor, with a flush of his usual self, as he accepted the package and started to break the seal.

Milo Vincent had only waited long enough after leaving the stage to visit his room and wash his face and change his soiled and bloody garments. Trim and neat, in that semi-darkness, neither daughter or father had noticed the bruises he had received in his heroic defense of his trust, but Marcus Tudor almost dropped the package of money as he caught sight of the blood-stained cut which pierced its center.

"There's blood upon it! Take it away!" he gasped, dropping the bundle, shrinking back and staring wildly about him. "It's a lie! My hands are clean! I never killed her!"

Though not a little astonished by these incoherent words, Vincent caught the package, laid it down carelessly as he said:

"There's nothing to be startled at, dear sir. Rather, we should drink a toast to the money that saved the life of one who is more or less dear to all of us!"

"Milo!" cried Zurilla, clinging to him, looking into his eyes as she caught and comprehended the vein of earnestness which underlay his light speech. "You have been in danger! You are hurt! Oh, my love!"

The warm pressure of his lips cut her excited cries short, and at the same time reassured her trembling heart.

"It is all over now, pet, and we will laugh instead of sobbing over it, if you please. I did have a little adventure, but your guardian angel carried me through in fine style, and if Don Bobtail Fandango don't paint Good Enough a glaring red before he closes his eyes in sleep, then I'll never attempt a prophecy again!"

This was quite sufficient to give all there an inkling of the truth, for they had had many a hearty laugh over the queer lamentations of the doughty little driver.

Marcus Tudor, realizing how nearly he had exposed his dangerous secret, rallied once more, and asked what it all meant. Vincent seated himself, with Zurilla on a cushion close beside him, and briefly but clearly gave an account of the adventure with the masked road-agents.

Every circumstance went so plainly to prove that the sole aim of the outlaws was to gain possession of the valuable packet carried by Vincent, that even the sorely shaken faculties of Marcus Tudor could not avoid reaching that conclusion.

"You must have been careless in your actions or your talk," he said, with a trace of his old-time severity. "I repeatedly cautioned you to be very secret—to keep your mission from the outside at all costs!"

"I neglected no precautions, sir," was the quiet reply. "The secret certainly leaked out, some way, but it was not at my end of the road."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That at least three of our own men were among the gang who attacked me," was the quiet reply.

"What! you don't mean to say—"

"That Jim Johnson, Frank Decker, and Free Harpe were among the dead men brought to town on our stage. As you know, any or all of them were deemed above suspicion—were classed among our best and trustiest hands. How the secret leaked out, I am, of course, unable even to guess. Yet I have my suspicions as to the prime mover in the plot. I believe that the young woman who called herself Stella Timberlake is none other than the notorious woman known here as Queen Titania; and if so, it is almost certain that she was acting under the instructions of Faro Saul."

"Saul Oberlin? Curse him from top to toe!" cried Marcus Tudor, bursting into a wild spasm of rage. "He wants to rob me of my wealth, and then drag me to the gallows. It is a lie! I defy him! He has no grounds for his vile charges! It is only a desperate blackmailing scheme! I never did it!"

In mute amazement Milo Vincent stared at the half-mad mine-owner who huskily uttered these disjointed sentences, then turned a wondering, inquiring look upon Zurilla, who, pale as death, hastily whispered in explanation:

"That wretch has been here to-day making trouble. I don't know just what he said, but it has shaken poor father in—"

"Stop!" cried Marcus Tudor, leaning forward in his chair and making a grasp at the arm of his daughter, as he seemed to catch the purport of her hasty whispering. "You shall not betray me! Utter not a word, or I'll disown you forever! Would you twist the rope that is to choke the life out of your own father? Be silent!—be secret as the very grave!"

"But, father," stammered the confused and terrified girl, "it is only Milo. Surely he may be trusted!"

"No one—they are all vile—all base and treacherous as the father of evil himself. Go!—go to your room, and remain there until I call you. Don't dare come back before, and don't let me catch you listening at the key-hole again!"

Sobbing, shocked to the very core, Zurilla arose, and bending over the chair in which her parent sat, she kissed him tenderly on the brow, then left the room.

Amazed, almost stupefied, unable to account for the terrible change in the man whom he had left in the height of health and spirits, Milo Vincent sat motionless, gazing at the mine-owner, who crouched back in his chair, eying him covertly, gnawing his thumb-nail, looking like a ghost of his usual self.

There was a dark and fearful secret in his past. For many long years he had hidden it deep down in his heart, trying to smother it out, but vainly. Outwardly so happy and prosperous, with all that the human heart could seemingly long for; with wealth steadily accumulating, with the respect and esteem of his fellow-men; in sober reality a man with more wretchedness hidden beneath a smiling mask never lived.

Scarcely a night passed over his head but what grim and bloody phantoms visited his bedside, if not in reality, in his broken dreams. Outwardly he showed no signs of this, but in his calmer moments Marcus Tudor knew that the terrible, torturing strain was surely if slowly doing its work. He knew that those terrible phantoms visited him more frequently and remained longer. Once or twice of late he had caught himself shrinking away and on the point of screaming aloud at the sight of them in broad daylight. He felt that his nerves were being shattered, that his strong brain was beginning to yield; and only for Zurilla, he would long since have blown his brains out rather than live on with the dread prospect of insanity staring him in the face.

In this wise was the ground broken for the gambler, though Faro Saul little suspected such a thing. And thus weakened, when the terrible charge was brought against him, the shaken brain of the mine-owner proved wholly unequal to the strain. If not insane, Marcus Tudor was but little short of it at that moment when he crouched in his chair, staring stealthily into the wondering countenance of his young foreman.

"Is the girl gone?" hissed Marcus Tudor, never moving a muscle as he uttered the words barely loud enough for the astonished and bewildered foreman to catch them. "Are you sure she isn't listening at the key-hole?"

"What do you mean?" a little sharply demanded Milo, flushing at this mean imputation against his love. "Are you mad, Mr. Tudor, that you say such things?"

"She might—she did before," was the reply, in the same guarded tones. "She heard him make those ridiculous threats about hanging me—me! ha! ha! Did you ever hear of such an utterly preposterous idea? Hang me! ha! ha!"

Despite his strong nerves, Milo Vincent could not keep down the cold chill that crept along his spinal cord as he listened to these words and noted that insanely cunning look. Though he did not pretend to understand how it had come about, he knew that Marcus Tudor must have received a terrible shock to reduce him to a state like this. He felt it a duty he owed both father and daughter to get at the bottom facts, and with that object in view, he asked:

"You are speaking of Faro Saul?"

He saw the mine-owner give a shiver and cast a glance around him as though he expected the mention of that name to conjure up some dreaded sight; but then Marcus Tudor, leaning far forward and speaking in a startling whisper, said:

"Milo Vincent, on your honor as a man, tell me: do you really and truly love Zurilla?"

"Better than life—better than all the world and heaven besides!" was the grave, yet fervent response.

"I know it. I was an ass for asking such a question. All love her—even the crawling reptile who—" again he broke off abruptly, with that fearsome glance around the gloomy room.

"Shall I strike a light, Mr. Tudor?" asked Milo, rising.

"No, no! keep your seat! The darkness is better for what I have to say. That is—if you will keep a close watch on the window, to make sure that infernal snake does not creep in while my eyes are turned another way. You'll do that, boy?"

"No person shall interrupt us until you are willing to meet them, be sure of that, sir."

"Thanks! You're a good boy, Milo; a fine fellow, worthy as any mere mortal ever can be of my darling. You love her, too; and her heart is bound up in you, lad, so completely that I fear it would kill her to lose you now."

"That will never be," was the grave response. "Matters have gone too far for any change from the future we have laid out. She is mine—I am hers. It is all said in those words."

"So I would have said this morning, but now— Look here, lad!" leaning still further forward, with one curved palm guiding the sibilant words. "That devil will tear her from us both, unless we strike before he can deal his blow! You are young, strong, skillful—I am too old and my hands are too weak to cope with him successfully. Kill him, and Zurilla is all yours!"

"Whom do you mean, Mr. Tudor?" slowly asked Vincent.

"The snake—the creeping devil fresh from Hades!"

"You mean Saul Oberlin?"

Marcus Tudor pressed the tip of a forefinger to his lips and cast a swift glance around them, then muttered eagerly:

"Mention no name, for your life! He is a subtle, cunning devil, and for all we know may be lying near at hand, listening to us now! No names—but, kill him! He will never relax his grip of steel while the faintest breath of life remains in his vile carcass! Kill him! Cut his black heart out and trample it under your feet until the faintest pulsation is forever crushed out of it! Then, come to me, and claim your reward! the richest mortal man ever won by performing an act of noble daring—my Zurilla!"

Despite himself—despite the fact that he knew Marcus Tudor was, at that moment, absolutely unaccountable for his words—Milo Vincent felt a powerful repulsion for the man who thus placed murder as the price of the hand of his only child. But stifling this feeling as quickly as possible, he reached out and firmly clasped the hot, trembling hand of the mine-owner, saying slowly, distinctly:

"Father, tell me what has passed between Faro Saul and you since I have been absent. What power has he over you?"

"It's a lie! a lie, false as the father of lies himself!" snarled the wretched man, tearing his hand free and cowering back in his chair. "You have no right to say that. Go, and leave me! I meant nothing—I was only joking! Go—go!"

Vincent arose and stepping to the door, called Zurilla. When she came, he clasped her to his breast, whispering:

"I fear your father is on the point of falling very ill. I will go and send the doctor as soon as possible. He has taken a sudden dislike to me, and bids me begone."

"Oh, Milo!" sobbed the poor girl. "And only a little while ago we were so happy; the future seemed so bright and full of peace; while now—now!"

She hid her head on his bosom, sobbing painfully.

"It is only a passing cloud, dearest," soothingly uttered Vincent, smoothing her hair gently. "It will soon float by, and all will shine more perfectly for the brief contrast. Cheer up, pet, and show yourself a brave little woman. Get him to bed—you and aunty—and I will have the doctor call. But remember, if I am needed in a hurry—if anything happens that you wish to see me at once—hang out the old signal, and I will be with you immediately."

"What are you two whispering about there?" sharply cried the mine-owner. "Even my own household are conspiring against me! Get out, I tell you lad! Begone! I'll send if I want you!"

With a parting kiss, Milo Vincent passed through the open window and strode rapidly toward town.

He had much to think over. Trials and enigmas were pouring upon him from all directions. But his strong teeth set themselves firmly, and his broad shoulders squared themselves as his fists clenched and his eyes gleamed with stern resolve. Look out, ye who are plotting against him and his love! If the collision ever comes, it will be a fight to the death.

Something like this was surging through that busy brain as Milo Vincent hastened along the pathway which led to the thicker portion of the scattered mining-camp, when he suddenly halted, stepped back a pace or two, one hand dropping to his ready revolver. He received a sharp blow on the breast, and felt some small object drop to the ground at his feet; but he never cast a look after this until he satisfied himself that there was no living person or object to be seen before him.

All around him were scattered rocks and little clumps of shrubbery amidst which an enemy could easily lie hidden, or steal rapidly away through the deepening twilight without running much risk of discovery, and knowing this, Milo stooped and picked up the missile, a small stone wrapped in paper.

He opened this and saw that it contained writing in a perfectly strange hand. Dim though the light was, his keen eyesight was able

to make out the words, without address or signature. Thus they ran:

"Give over your hopes of winning Zurilla Tudor—so called—for a wife, if you would avert death from yourself and ruin from her. A word to the wise should be sufficient."

With a hard smile that showed his white teeth, Milo Vincent folded the paper and placed it in his note-book, then cast a keen glance around him as he drew his revolver and turned the cylinder on its pin, to make sure it was in order for use.

Then he walked briskly on, to find the doctor.

CHAPTER XI.

A HARD HORSE TO CURRY.

"THAT'S fer Jim ye butchered, devil roast ye!" screamed the rough as he saw the figure of Epaphroditus Weatherwax plunge headlong, through the little cloud of flame-tinted smoke. "I'll riddle ye like a sifter, an' carve ye to dog-meat!"

With sharp cries of alarm the crowd broke and scattered to either side, leaving all clear between and around the two men, seemingly in a panic; yet there were brave men and bold among the number, too.

But there is something in a surprise of this sort that "takes the starch out of" the best of men for the first few breaths, and recognizing death in those bloodshot eyes and that murderous-mad visage, one and all thought only of getting out of the direct line of fire in the shortest possible time.

As he gave utterance to that sanguinary threat, the burly tough leaped forward, cocking his pistol for a shot at the prostrate figure, his left hand flashing forth a long, ugly-looking bowie-knife from the sheath which hung at his hip.

Beyond a doubt he meant to literally fulfill his mad threat, but before his heavily-shod feet touched the floor after that first fierce leap, there came a sudden and startling change which none, much less himself, were expecting.

With the elasticity of a rubber ball, Epaphroditus Weatherwax no sooner struck the floor than he sprung partly erect again, flinging the heavy glass tumbler which he had just emptied of whisky when that wild cry called his attention to the brother of the dead road-agent, straight and swift as a lightning bolt at the head of the rough.

"Tit fer tat—an' how d'ye like it, ye howlin' hyeeny!" squealed the ancient, as he made a sidelong leap to one side to avoid the anticipated shot.

It came, but was harmless, expending its force on the wall behind the counter, for the whirling glass struck the rough fairly in the center of his face, crashing to atoms, knocking his head back and fairly lifting him clear of his feet.

A horrible curse, yell and groan, all mingled together, came through the sound of splintering glass, and dropping his weapons, the stricken man clasped both hands to his injured face as he shook the entire building with his tremendous fall.

"Down goes your apple-cart, an' ef ye don't spill all your peaches, I'm gwine to hev a squar' meal—your bear me!" snarled Old Pap Weatherwax, leaping forward and kicking knife and pistol into the corner, then tearing away the belt of arms and hurling them through the open door.

Then, facing the startled crowd, a cocked revolver in each hand, his eyes blazing with honest indignation, one foot planted heavily upon the prostrate form of his ruffianly assailant, the ancient pealed forth his red-hot defiance:

"The king-pin down, an' I'm good fer the rest o' the pizen gang! Put up or shet up! One at a time or the hull inv'ice in a boodle—come an' see your Uncle Fuller! Nother sit o' fickness comin' on, an' I'm ele King Death on a howlin' jimboree! Forty foot scythes an' a hour-glass with on'y two grains o' sand into it! I kin scalp the heels of a thousan' sech dirty whelps at a swing, an' not hafe try! Next, durn ye!"

Those eyes seemed balls of living fire as they ranged swiftly from one face to another, looking for a sign of backing the fallen rough. Looks, voice, manner and all showed how ready the ancient was to meet his foes, be they how many they might, and in that moment all doubts as to his "grit" fled forever from the minds of those who heard and saw him.

"Not a durn one ready fer to take up a posish on the anxious seat?" cried the old man, shaking back his shaggy locks with a half-fierce, half-contemptuous laugh. "Must I turn my back fer you to pluck up sand enough to pull on a ole man who's got one foot in the grave an' t'other 'ne dead long ago? Ain't they one in the hull crowd's got tongue long enough fer to speak up? Be ye cowards, from biggest to littlest?"

As he uttered these scornful sentences, the blazing eyes of Old Pap Weatherwax seemed to dwell longest upon a truly Herculean form among the others; and with a slight flush tinged his evil but handsome face, Faro Saul stepped a trifle forward, though his hands remained empty as those pistols covered him with the rapidity of thought itself.

"You want to go a little slow, uncle," he said, his voice deep and not without a certain menace in its tones that the crowd was not slow to recognize, as was indicated by their unanimous parting once more. "Nobody's going to hurt you—"

"Not while I'm to the fore!" cried a clear, ringing voice, as Milo Vincent strode into the room, his good right hand armed. "Don't think that Good Enough is composed even in part of such dirty whelps, old man! He's only a gambling bummer who—"

Faro Saul turned white as a corpse, his black eyes filling with a terrible light, as he hissed savagely:

"Careful, Milo Vincent! Pick your words with a little more care, or you may find your hands full of business!"

The foreman faced the giant sport without the slightest trace of fear or excitement in face or voice; but those who retained sufficient coolness to take notes, saw that he stood with his pistol so that the slightest turn of his wrist would suffice to give him a *thought-shot* at the gambler, long before that worthy, skillful and quick as he was, could draw a weapon.

"Do you take up the cudgels in defense of Tom Johnson, then?" he sharply demanded.

Saul flushed hotly, and his usually ready tongue blundered a little as he managed to make reply:

"Johnson—I thought you meant—"

"If I did not speak with sufficient distinctness before, I will now," said Vincent, deliberately, as Faro Saul hesitated. "This old man is a stranger in Good Enough. To-day he proved himself a man, in every respect, and is entitled to the respect and good-will of every decent citizen. For that reason, and to guard against his forming an evil opinion of our town, I said that he must not judge all by the action of Tom Johnson, a drunken, worthless, gambling bummer and dead-beat. I chanced to be an eye-witness of his assault, and none but a coward and the associate of cowards, would be guilty of such an act. He has justly forfeited his life, and if my friend chooses to take it, I'll back him against whoever objects for all I'm worth, be it one man or a score!"

At this juncture the fallen wretch began to struggle beneath the pressure of the ancient's foot, and the latter created a diversion by crying out in a whimsical tone:

"Lay still, ye squarmin' riptyle, while the ole man talks to ye like a Dutch uncle! What fer did ye try to bust me in the bugle from abind without even givin' me a tickle to say I was in your 'tater-row? Which it's right thar ye made the dirty mistake. I'm the most 'commodatin' critter ye ever hear tell on, an' ef you'd come up an' said to me with honey on your tongue an' a bit o' good musk into your breath, that the airth hedn't room on it fer the all-two-both on us, the ole man would 'a' shucked off his boots an' tuck a free skoot up the golden ladder without a grunt or a objec'—he's so durned a'commodatin' when you rub him the way o' the ha'r!"

"But you didn't. You crup' up abind an' giv' a screech that'd set the teeth of a cross-cut saw on aidge, an' made me pour a snift' o' whisky down my Sunday thrapple in the hurry to save it—fer I'm a howlin' liar ef I didn't think it was ole Gabriel pullin' in his breath fer to toot the gittin'-up horn o' last 'lection-day!"

"An' then you tried fer to sink a mineral-shaft into my front yard, without runnin' a line, plantin' a post or stickin' up your name, with the title o' the lode an' date o' diskivery as made an' pervided fer by law. All o' which wasn't enough, but you must run your durned bullet-head ag'inst a tumbler which I s'pose I'll hev to pay fer—durn ye, anyhow!"

This "lame and impotent conclusion" drew a yell of laughter from many of the spectators, but evidently Tom Johnson did not look at the matter as a laughable one, for he snarled:

"You butchered my brother Jim, an' I'll drink your heart's blood for it, if ever I git up ag'in, cuss ye, body an' boots!"

"You hain't swore to that effec', hev yef' drawled Pap."

"By his blood!"

"That settles it, then!" and the ancient promptly removed his heavy foot from the back of the bleeding wretch, leaping lightly back a pace and standing erect with folded arms. "I never tole a lie my own self, an' it's a rule o' mine to never make a man, be he frind or enemy, commit parjury ef I kin help it. Git up you, an' prepar' to squinch your thu'st, honey!"

Slowly the burly ruffian clambered to his feet, swaying a little unsteadily as he brushed the clotted gore from his gashed and bruised face, staring around with a slightly bewildered air.

"This way, purty lad," croaked the ancient, with a squint of his wicked eye and twist to his mouth that caused a grim chuckle to run through a portion of the crowd. "Shall I pin back my years an' soap my head afore you begin your great an' onequaled feat o' swalleration? Ef so, or ef they is anythin' else in the wide world ye want, jest holler fer it! Lord love ye, honey! I'd do 'most anythin' in or out."

o' reason fer to obleedge a sweet scented cuss-tomer like you—I jes' would!"

The bruised and bleeding ruffian turned and glowered at the tantalizing speaker, his eyes red as the blood that trickled down his bearded face as he slowly muttered:

"You're the critter, then? You're the one that butchered pore Jim, be ye?"

"We'll play I did, anyhow," was the easy reply. "It'd be a durned shame fer to spile fun by stumblin' over a little pint like that! Yas, I'm the gory slayer, sart'in'!"

"But I don't want to make no mistake," slowly, laboriously added the bleeding brute. "Ef you didn't do it, say so. I want to kill the right man fu'st. After that, I'll settle with you, if you want. Was you the man that killed him—that butchered my brother, the best man that ever trod on sole-leather—the whitest lad that ever picked trigger or played with a ten-inch bit o' steel! Was it you?"

"Sense you're so durn perticklar, le's see. Ef your brother was all you say, I never tetch'd hide nur ha'r of him. But ef he was a dirty, hairy, whisky-soaked bummer, fuller o' sin an' wickedness than a fleec-dog is o' fleas; ef he was the livin' photograph o' your own sweet self; ef he was a thief, a road-agent who hed to kiver his face with a bit o' rag afore he could muster up grit enough to look cross-eyed into the face of a white man; ef he was that bit o' car'on layin' yender on the coolin'-board—then I killed him! An' now, as the 'mortal Billyum Tweedle said: 'What ye goin' to do 'bout it?'"

Crouching lower, bit by bit, glaring savagely into the face of the speaker, licking away the drops of warm blood as they trickled down through his matted beard, the very personification of sullen revenge, Tom Johnson listened to that careless yet terribly cutting speech. As if unconsciously to himself, one hand crept upward until it was hidden from view in his bosom. Then, when Old Pap Weatherwax drawled forth that immortal quotation, balancing himself on the tips of his toes with arms still folded across his chest and his head on one side, winking and blinking owlishly, the ruffian uttered a wolfish snarl and flashed forth a long knife, leaping forward and making a slashing cut that, had it taken effect, would most assuredly have sent the ancient to another world.

But for all his seeming carelessness, Pap Weatherwax was fully on the alert, and swift as thought his left arm shot out, and striking the wrist of the ruffian, brushed his armed hand to one side. Then came a sudden thud, and Tom Johnson spun half-way round as a hard fist struck him on the jaw. Before he could recover himself Old Pap caught him in his arms, tipped him over and dropped him head-first on the floor.

With a shrill whoop, the ancient leaped high into the air, drawing up his feet as though about to dash them, reinforced by his own weight, with terrible force upon the skull of the foiled bully. A thrill of horror ran through the spectators, and a cry broke from the lips of Milo Vincent, as he made an involuntary movement to arrest the old man; but with a mocking laugh, Pap Weatherwax alighted with feet spread just sufficiently to clear the apparently doomed man's head.

"Git up, you clumsy critter!" he cried, tapping the bloody lips of the fallen man as his face turned around, with one foot. "Drunk, ain't ye? Cain't stan' up all alone by yourself? Fu'st you know, honey, you'll git hurt ef you keep on them terrible gymnasty things—'deed you jes' will! You're gittin' too old an' clumsy fer sech limber tricks, an' ef you're wise, you'll leave 'em to soople-j'inted saplin's like your Uncle Fuller. Gi'me your paw—whoop up, now—so fashion!"

Stooping, Pap caught the burly ruffian by one hand and fairly lifted him to his feet. In a dazed manner he stared around him, but that his thirst for revenge was not in the slightest degree lessened, was sufficiently plain from the torrent of husky oaths and curses which flowed from his lips. And catching a glimpse of the lamp light reflected from the polished blade of his knife, he rushed forward and snatched it up, brushing the blood from his eyes as he glared madly around in search of his hated enemy.

"Stop him!" cried several of the party, whose sympathy plainly had been won by the cool daring and skill displayed by the one whom they were at first inclined to set down as more of a braggart than an actor. "Send the rascal after his thieving brother! Lynch him! String him up!"

"No, no!" as loudly cried another portion of the crowd. "The poor devil is crazy and not accountable for his actions! Let him go; there's no proof that he belongs to the gang!"

"Take the knife from him, or else—"

"Not on my a'count, gents!" quickly interposed Pap, with a cheerful grin that seemed to split his countenance into nearly equal halves. "The ole man kin take keer o' himself, a'most al'ays. Stop, you!" he cried sharply as Johnson wheeled toward him at the sound of his hated voice. "Stop an' think it over fu'st, honey. Ef you should happen to git me mad, I'm mighty dub'ous you sup sorer with a mighty

long spoon! I'm meek as a suckin' lamb on tel then—when I'm a holy terror right from the 'factory o' cyclones an' airtquakes! Git down onto your bunkers an' beg fer your life, an' I'll let ye go with a blue ribbon 'round your neck as one o' the 'lected! Ef you don't—waal, ef you ain't the durnedest hog I ever see!"

With a grating snarl, Tom Johnson rushed to close with his adversary, his left arm bowed to beat off any blow while he kept his armed hand behind him so that he could not be foiled after the same fashion as before. If he could once close, he knew he could drive his steel home with certainty.

But in the old man he found "a mighty hard horse to curry," as the profane bath it. A swift blow alighted on his elbow, driving his forearm against his face, and as he whirled his armed hand around, Pap ducked low and to one side, curling one foot around the infuriated bully's legs, hurling him headlong. Then, active as a cat, he leaped astride the fallen man, holding a revolver pressed against his temple as he grated:

"You wouldn't take a hint, an' now you've got me madder'n two wet hens! Open your music-box an' sing a song fer life, or durned ef I don't let all the wind out o' your bellows ef I hev to blow the bull top o' your cabeza off! Sing durn ye!"

Bruised, battered, half-stunned though he was, Tom Johnson showed that he possessed the sullen grit of a bulldog. Lying helplessly at the mercy of the man whom he had thrice attempted to kill, he stared with bloodshot eyes up into that grim, menacing countenance without flinching, without a trace of fear. And, ruffian though he was, as the excited crowd saw this, there was a growing sentiment in his favor which found vent in increasing mutterings.

Apparently neither Johnson nor Old Pap Weatherwax heard these. The one struggled desperately to turn his adversary or cast him off, but in vain. The ancient clung to him like a veritable Old Man of the Mountains, one hand gripping his collar, the other pressing a cocked revolver to his temple.

"Tune up, ye gwine-to-be cherrybim! Strike the key-note an' sling out the music ef ye don't want to go to never-come-back-ag'in by lightnin' express! Ef life ain't wu'th beggin' fer when ye git up to your years in a pesky slough o' despond, it ain't wu'th bevin'. Pipe up, or out goes your light!"

"Let up on him, old man!" cried Faro Saul, taking a step forward, but pausing abruptly as he found himself covered by the weapon of Milo Vincent, who said sharply:

"Hands off, everybody, and you in particular, Saul Oberlin! It is man to man, and Johnson began the row. Let him squeal, or take his medicine like a white man!"

"That's the ticket! Fair play an' no favor!" Faro Saul saw that the tide was against him, and though it was a bitter pill for him to swallow, he knew that he must draw back or die. There was business of the purest sort in the eye and air of the handsome young foreman!

"If he was responsible for his actions, I wouldn't say a word," he said, sullenly. "But any one can see that he is crazed by the death of his brother. It will be murder!"

"It would have been murder, had not the old man been too quick for the cowardly cur," was the swift retort. "The old man's my friend, and no one can double-bank him while I'm here."

"Let 'em fight it out!" cried the crowd, almost to a man.

And Faro Saul, bowing to the majority, fell back.

"Fer the third an' last time, honey, *spiel*!" cried Old Pap Weatherwax, boring down with his pistol until the muzzle left a purple ring on the skin. "Knuckle down or kick the slop-bucket clean over!"

"Shoot!" huskily snarled the defeated man, his eyes all ablaze. "Kill me or I'll kill you!"

"That ain't so easy did, as you'd ort to know by this," grinned Pap, then suddenly altering his mocking tone to one stern and deadly: "Enough foolin'. You've hed three licks at me, an' ef I was fool enough to let up onto ye, you'd try fer another right off the han'le. Now you want to beg, afore I count ten, or you'll go to j'ine your brother in a hurry. Beg like the dirty whelp you be, an' sw'ar that you'll never ag'in try to shoot a man in the back when he ain't lookin', an' I'll let you free."

"See you in 'tarnal blazes fu'st, an' then I won't!"

"All right, honey; go fu'st an' tell the boss to keep a hot corner fer me!" ferociously laughed the ancient, beginning to count. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—may the Lord hev—eight—marcy onto—nine—your mis'able soul, amen!—ten!" and as his revolver exploded sharply, Old Pap Weatherwax leaped to his feet and clear of his antagonist.

CHAPTER XII.

VICTORY, FOLLOWED BY DEFEAT.

LITTLE by little the bulldog grit displayed by Tom Johnson was gaining for him the milder feelings of the crowd, nearly every one of whom had at first felt that hanging was too

mild a punishment for one who would act after such a dastardly fashion. And while there was no one who cared or dared to take a positive move in his behalf after that stern declaration backed by the ready pistol of Milo Vincent, half-uttered threats and mutterings of disapprobation grew louder and more ominous as Old Pap Weatherwax pinned his enemy to the floor, and with revolver clapped to his temple, deliberately counted off the seconds. And then, when the weapon exploded and the old man leaped to his feet with that shrill, wild cry, it was echoed back by a still wilder chorus:

"Durn a man that'd plug a gritty cove like that!"

"Give him a dose o' the same med'cine!"

"They ain't no room in Good Enough fer his kidney!"

The ancient wheeled upon the malcontents, but it was only to laugh mockingly in their faces and enjoy their gaping wonder as Tom Johnson scrambled to his feet, alive, untouched by the bullet which all had believed was intended for his brain.

"'Nother sit o' sickness comin' on, an' this time I'm a durn fool right from the center o' Looneyville! I knewed it was my bounden duty fer to slaughterify that howlin' stag-beetle, but I hedn't sense 'nough left fer to do it up brown. I was so nigh crazy with pure idioticness that he looked to me too much like a white man fer that, an' stead o' makin' a batter-puddin' o' his cabeza, I jes' drilled a worm-hole in the floor. But I know I'll be sorry fer doin' of it as soon as I come back to my nat'ral state ag'in. The hairy cuss is got plenty o' grit, but that's his only recommendation fer marcy. He's chuck-fuller o' p'izen then a rattler in August! Double-distilled meanness sticks out o' him all over a yard long! Ef he was a twin babby an' hed the fu'st show at the grub, he'd bite the nipple off'n his mammy to keep his brother from gittin' what he'd left!"

Unable at first to comprehend the actual facts of the case, the crowd stared in open-mouthed amazement as the man whom they all believed doomed beyond earthly hope of salvation, rose to his feet. They thought it but a spasmodic effort, soon to end in the heavy fall of a corpse; but the absence of blood puzzled them anew; and when they divined the truth—when Old Pap uttered his querulous excuse, a chorus of enthusiastic shouts and cries went up from the fickle crowd. At that moment they were ready to swear the battered old man was king-pin of heroes!

"You do me proud, gents!" and Old Pap Weatherwax bowed low, grinning from ear to ear. "'Pears like the sit o' sickness is workin' off 'thout doin' much damidge, a'ter all! Ef you all's agreed that I done right in lettin' up on the p'izen critter, mebbe I wasn't sech a pesky fool as I thunk! But—"

"On guard, pard! Look out fer Johnson!" cried Vincent, in a sharp tone of warning.

The ancient wheeled just as the beaten ruffian was on the point of leaping upon him, but his bold front caused the wretch to falter, stretching a hand out behind him, growling:

"Gi' me a pistil or a knife; somebody! I'll kill him! I'll tear his heart out an' eat it raw! He killed pore Jim!"

"Now I am gwine to git mad all over!" sharply emphasized Old Pap, his eyes ablaze, his voice ringing out clear as a bell. "Look here, Tom Johnson. You tried to murder me when my back was turned, an' so doin' you spiled my drink. I let you down as eas' as I could, when I mought jest as well rubbed you clean off the rolls. You tuck it so kindly that you wanted to make sassidge meat out o' me, not once, but twicet over. Three times I hed you onder my heel, an' as of'en like a durned fool I let you go without smashin' your p'izen head. But a body's got to draw the line some-whar, an' I draw it deep at three. Ef you try fer another, you're gwine to git hurt, bad!"

"Ef you don't kill me, I'll kill you!" growled Johnson.

"Good enough! I kin feel 'nother sit o' sickness stealin' over me, an' this time it smells like a he-old butcher in a gory slaughter-house! Sense you won't live, how'll you hev it? Nominate your p'izen, an' I'll see that you git all the dose you kin tote from here to the lower regions! Pard, may I ax the favor o' you?" he added, turning to Milo Vincent.

"And I'll serve as second for Johnson," quickly uttered Faro Saul, stepping forward and laying a hand on the arm of the battered bully.

"Why, man, surely you'll not meet him in a duel, after all the dirt he has played you?" muttered Vincent, half-disgusted.

"He will hev it," was the hard response.

"If I don't settle him fer good an' all now, he'll stab me in the back from kiver some time when I ain't lookin'. I tried all I knowed to make him keep his life in his pocket, but he won't listen to reason. He wants jes' one more lesson."

"Look here," and Vincent grasped Old Pap by the arm and stared him fixedly in the eye as he spoke deliberately. "I'll have nothing to do with the affair unless you pledge me your

word to make it pure business. You've thrown away more than enough chances, and good man as you have proved yourself so far, you can't keep on doing this without his getting in his work at last. Say you'll act in earnest, or this fight goes no further while I can pull trigger or play steel!"

"Don't you git uneasy, mate," with a short, dry laugh that carried conviction with it. "The power is onto me like a load o' dynamite. I'm a butcher from Slaughterville, an' I hain't hed a hot red drink fer an age! That two-legged hog'll be on the market in the shape of a hunk o' measly pork, quicker'n a old maid kin jump at a offer o' marriage in a drought!"

"All right, then; but mind, my friend," soberly; "if you play any more of your wild and foolish tricks, I'll take it as an insult to myself, and call you to a strict account."

Meanwhile Faro Saul was busy with his principal, picking bits of splintered glass from his face, bathing the gashes and whispering to him in an undertone. In all but one respect Tom Johnson listened to him quietly, and agreed to follow his advice; but he would not consent to ask for a delay until the coming of day.

"Thar's pore Jim, an' he killed him. Ef I waited even a hour, I'd feel like I was takin' sides ag'in' him. Right now's the time. On'y make it so I cain't help but take him down to blazes with me—it's all I ax!" deliberately uttered Tom.

Placing the man under charge of those whom he felt he could trust, Faro Saul approached Vincent and they began discussing the terms of the duel. In accordance with his principal's wish, the Giant Gambler proposed that the two men be fastened together by the left hands, then permitted to fight it out with knives; but Vincent utterly refused to entertain the proposition.

"Your principal has tried to murder my friend on three separate occasions, and each time has had his life given to him when it was justly forfeited. We don't propose to throw away another point. If he wants to fight, he must fight after a manly fashion."

"And that is?"

"With revolvers, at any decent distance, and according to rule. If either principal attempts any trickery, he forfeits his life that instant."

Vincent remained firm, though Old Pap Weatherwax freely offered to accept any terms that might best please the enemy, and the final decision was this: The men to use their own weapons; to be stationed back to back in the outer air, under the light of the moon; their revolvers to be placed on the ground ten yards in advance of each man as they stood thus; at the word they were to advance, step by step as ten units were counted; then pick up their tools and fire at will.

Neither Faro Saul nor Tom Johnson were satisfied with these conditions, but with the voice of the crowd against them there was nothing for them but submission. And, after all, the odds were not so great. By bathing and a little judicious use of the lancet, the eyesight of the bully was restored to something like its normal condition, and Tom Johnson was in better fix for sighting a pistol than he would be in the morning, when swelling and inflammation had begun.

After these preliminaries had been arranged, there was but little time cut to waste. The seconds took their principals outside, where the distance was already marked off. The moon shone with sufficient brilliancy for the occasion, and in high good-humor the citizens ranged themselves along both sides of the street, eager to witness a duel after the orthodox fashion.

To Don Bobtail Fandango was granted the privilege of giving the word, on condition that he should attend strictly to business and not yield to the temptation of making a spread-eagle speech. The principals were placed back to back. The pistols were placed on the ground, each beside a burning lamp, that there might be no difficulty in finding them, as well as no opportunity for trickery through the collusion of a friend.

And then, amid a breathless silence, Don Bob cried:

"All ready, gents?"

"Yas—hurry up!" growled Tom Johnson.

"Ditto from your Uncle Fuller!" cried the ancient.

"Mind the word then. The critter as takes too big a step, or tries to steal in two to one number, 'll hev to settle with me! Ready—one!"

Each man strode forward a single pace, then halted for the next word. In regular succession they came, and at the tenth count both stooped and snatched up their weapons.

"Wheel an' cut loose!" squealed Don Bob, excitedly.

Swiftly the men wheeled, Tom Johnson firing first in his bloodthirsty longing for revenge, but a mocking laugh burst from the lips of the old man, mingling with the sharp crack of his own deliberately-aimed weapon.

With a wild yell Tom Johnson staggered, the revolver dropping from his grasp as the well-aimed bullet crashed its way through his tightly clinched hand. With a furious curse he stooped

and caught up the pistol with his left hand, firing two shots in swift succession, as he rushed to closer quarters, holding his own life as nothing if he could only take his foeman down to death with him.

"I al'ays did despise a hog!" cried Pap, sending his second bullet home with the same cool deliberation.

Another mad yell, and Tom Johnson turned half-around, his left arm dropping to his side, a bullet through his elbow.

"Cuss you—a millyun cusses on your head!" he gasped, bursting into tears that were even more terrible than his flood of blasphemy. "Kill me—put a eend to it, durn ye! I dont want to live a helpless cripple! Kill me—sen' me to jine Jim! Oh, a cripple—a cripple in both arms!"

"Look to him, somebody, an' I'll stan' good fer all charges they's made," cried Pap, all traces of levity vanishing.

He had time to say no more, for Vincent, fearing further trouble from some of the fellows who might be in secret sympathy with the brother of the dead road-agent, caught the veteran by the arm and hurried him through the excited crowd.

"You would have showed better sense, had you killed him outright, old friend," he muttered, when once fairly clear of the gathering. "You could have done that as easily as to cripple him. All the sympathy would have been with you, then, but now—there may come a serious after-clap."

"I couldn't bring myself to kill the pore devil," seriously replied the old man. "You see fer yourself how often I let up on him when I hed him foul. I see he was crazy from grievin' over his brother. I wouldn't hit him hard ontel I see that ef I didn't putt the carb on, he'd keep up his lick ontel he throwed me cold. I'm sorrier then you kin be over the way it's panned out, but a man with life an' one arm is better then a dead carkidge."

"For him, possibly, but I fear not for you. Still, there may be no trouble over it, if you keep a little out of sight until the first excitement blows over."

While talking, the two men had been walking rapidly away, and as Vincent abruptly paused, they were near the outskirts of the town. Hesitating for a moment, he spoke earnestly:

"Will you trust yourself to me for a couple of hours?"

"For a 'tarnity, ef you ax it," was the prompt reply.

"I want you to go with me to the White Elephant."

"A sort o' menadgery, I reckon?"

"A gambling-house, run by Faro Saul."

"I hain't got a stray ducat in my hull wardrobe, so—"

"I don't want to play, nor to have you gamble. I only want you to use your eyes the best you can. Faro Saul has a dealer of faro whom I want you to see. Look closely, and then give me your candid opinion when we come out. It is of the utmost importance, or I wouldn't ask it of you, just now."

"Old as I be, I never yit hesitated to take a good look at a woman when I got the chaine. Lead on, my covey!"

In five minutes the twain were in a spacious, rather neatly-fitted up establishment, considering its location in a third-rate mining camp.

Owing to the excitement which had reigned in another quarter of the town, the gathering at the tables was but thin, and without actually joining the players at the faro-table, our friends could readily watch the movements of the dealer.

A woman, dressed in rich wine-colored velvet, ornamented profusely with chased golden buttons; with short curls of rich brown hair; with arms plump and superbly rounded; with small, white and shapely hands, gleaming with jewels; a figure that seemed perfection itself, though on a rather diminutive scale; with a close-fitting mask of black velvet which fell in a fringe of gold below her chin.

Long and patiently the two men watched her, without betraying their especial purpose. From the front, from each side, listening to her occasional sentences as she announced the beginning of a deal or called attention to the coming of the final turn; summing her up as carefully as though their lives depended upon their giving a correct report of each detail.

It was not until the room filled almost to overflowing that Vincent touched his companion on the arm and made his way out of the gambling-room. He flushed a little anxiously as he saw how many eyes were turned upon them, and recognized a number of those who had been witnesses of the duel; but no one ventured to check their retreat, and they were soon safely outside, walking rapidly away from the White Elephant.

"Well, what do you think of Queen Titania?" asked Vincent as he came to an abrupt halt in a shady corner.

"That she slings on a mighty sight more style then she did when she tried to play bugs onto you in the hearse, to-day," was the prompt response.

"Then you think they are one and the same

person?" eagerly asked Vincent, thrilling to find his own suspicions so promptly confirmed by the opinion of another.

"Course I couldn't take my Bible oath onto it, but—"

Milo Vincent never heard the conclusion of that deliberate sentence, if it ever reached a legitimate conclusion.

He barely caught the sound of rushing footsteps, then a crushing blow fell upon his head—a sharp pang shot through his side—and all was blackness!

With a hollow groan the young foreman opened his eyes and stared vacantly around him. He could just distinguish the stars of heaven dancing and whirling in a mad, crazy waltz. He could see no moon. He gave a gasping moan, and tried to rise; but in vain. A faintness as of death swept over him, and with it came an unutterable horror of thus dying, alone, in the dark!

With a desperate effort of will, he reached his belt, dragged a revolver from its scabbard, cocked it, and then pulled the trigger. He tried to shout aloud; but his feeble remnant of strength left him, and with a gasping moan, his head drooped.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD PAP WEATHERWAX TAKES A NAP.

It would have been better for both Milo Vincent and Old Pap Weatherwax if they had felt a less absorbing interest in the personal appearance of Queen Titania, and at the same time kept a little closer watch over their own surroundings.

Long before their intense curiosity concerning her was satisfied, inimical eyes had noted their presence and a crafty remorseless hand was pulling the wires by means of which their discomfiture, if not destruction, was assured.

Their faces, figure and dress were all carefully marked beyond the possibility of a mistake, and then grim, evil-hearted men lay in ambush without the door of the White Elephant, awaiting the coming of their destined victims.

Stealthily they were dogged by armed men whose bootless feet gave back no echo, and then, as they came to a pause in the lonely corner, a low whisper passed between the thugs.

"Don't make a mistake. Lay the young 'un out cold, an' take t'other—you know how. Ready—time!"

Swift and deadly was the attack. Without a word or a sound of warning, four shadowy figures leaped upon the twain, striking hard and sure. Without even a gasp or groan, Milo Vincent sunk down in his tracks. The elder man dropped to his knees, and showed faint signs of resistance, but then he went down on his face as another blow descended upon his skull, and two heavy bodies fell on top of him.

"Clap a stopper on his jaw, while I make sure o' the other!" hissed the man who appeared to act as leader.

He stooped, then rose, and red blood was sprinkled over his right hand and dripping from the point of his knife!

"He'll never squeal!" with a low, savage laugh that was more like the hiss of an angry serpent than aught of human mirth. "Boost the old man up and play him for a skinful of budge. If we meet any curious cuss, let me do the chin-nin'."

Locking arms around the body of Old Pap Weatherwax, two of the ruffians lifted him to his feet, the third placing his limp arms around their necks. And thus, having the appearance of being good-natured comrades of an unfortunate who had thus early in the evening been "knocked out" in his fight with bad whisky, the thugs moved away from the spot where Milo Vincent lay in a growing pool of his own blood, his sightless eyes turned up toward heaven, his face drawn and ghastly.

Selecting the deepest shadows and taking a roundabout course where passengers were scarce the thugs reached the rear of a certain building in Good Enough without encountering a single person whose memory might afterward prove troublesome.

Tapping lightly at the door it swung silently open, and the party entered without the slightest hesitation, though all was dark as Erebus. Only until the door was closed and barred by the chief of the thugs, then a widening shaft of light shot out before them, as from the moved slide of a dark-lantern, though the bearer was wholly invisible in the shadowy rear.

The leader stepped briskly ahead and stooped to spring a cunningly-hidden trap-door. He stepped aside and made a sign, the meaning of which appeared to be perfectly plain to his fellows, for without a word of question they caught Old Pap Weatherwax by the arms and let him drop, feet-foremost, through the hole. A thump and a muffled cry came back.

"Hell's delight!" grated the chief, as he stooped over the aperture. "The hound has come to his senses, and we never stripped off his weapons! Down with you, lads! The light, now!"

As the bright rays shot through the opening, showing him where to jump, the head thug leaped into the pit, closely followed by his mates. They saw that their captive was strug-

gling to arise, though clumsily, and leaping upon him they tore away his weapons, and stretched him out motionless with another cruel blow on the skull.

How long an interval elapsed before his senses returned to him, Old Pap Weatherwax had no means of knowing or even of guessing. He knew that his senses came back to him with a tremendous sneeze, for his ears were ringing, his nose tingling, and his eyes filling with water. He could detect a powerfully pungent odor, and winked owlishly as a brilliant light flashed into his eyes.

"So! you've got back from the evergreen shore, eh?" rung out a mocking voice, toward which Pap turned his eyes slowly, feeling as though the joints of his neck had suddenly become rusted. "How do you like it, as far as you've got, anyway?"

Not a sound escaped the lips of the old man. His teeth came together and his jaws squared themselves. The dazed, bewildered stare in his eyes changed to a steady, concentrated light as they roved swiftly over the form of the speaker.

There was nothing else to be seen, for not only was the face hidden beneath a black mask, but a sort of cowl concealed his hair and there were gloves upon his hands. With these exceptions, the garb of the man was that ordinarily worn by a laborer in the mines—coarse, rough, soiled with dry mud, and spotted here and there with tar or machine-oil.

In figure he was of medium height, apparently built for both strength and activity.

From this scrutiny, Pap turned to take a view of himself, as far as that was practicable.

He was lying on a dry flooring of cement and concrete, in one corner of the room, with his back propped against the angle formed by the meeting walls. His feet were tied together, and a slight effort told him that his wrists and elbows were secured after the same fashion, though these were out of sight behind him.

"No use there, my dear fellow," laughed the mask. "We think too much of you to take any risks of losing your sweet society. You have made so many warm friends in Good Enough since your arrival, that without these precautions, you might be led to abandon your best well-wishers, and thus possibly fall into evil company. We feel obliged to guard against any such mishap befalling you, even at the risk of hurting your feelings a trifle."

The glib tongue ceased to wag, and the mask gazed keenly through the holes in his mask at his captive, as though expecting an outburst of some sort from him; but not a word or sound came from those bearded lips.

The mask strode forward, halting when just without arm's-length of the prisoner, gazing with burning orbs into his face as he spoke jeeringly:

"Not a word? Did the boys tear out your tongue before bringing you here?"

"You're playin' the jassack big enough fer all-two both on us, so what's the use o' my chip-pin' in?"

"You can talk, then? Good! That's all I wanted to find out," exclaimed the mask, with a short, hard laugh. "I began to fear the gentle love-taps the boys lent you had bereft you of the power of speech, if not of reasoning powers; and that would be a terribly severe blow to us, your sincere admirers and red-hot friends!"

"Ob, you make me tired!" languidly drawled the ancient, closing his eyes and nodding sleepily.

"You don't care for compliments, then? All right. We'll come down to sober business, then," said the mask, with a complete change of voice and manner. "First, I suppose you are curious to learn how and why you have been brought here?"

"Waal," drawled Pap, with a prolonged yawn, "ef you got to wag your chin, I reckon it mought as well be on that subject as any other. I'd a heap ruther you'd pucakachee an' give this sink-hole a chance to purify its wind a little, though! I kin stan' a skunk fer a while, but I ain't raaly hankerin' fer its comp'ny all the while! No 'fense; I don't s'pose you kin help the 'fiction o' natur'."

"I thought we were to dispense with compliments," sneered the mask.

"Ef you call that parfume a compliment, I wish to thunder you would 'pense with it—or else fetch me a spring c'loes-pin to saddle my pore bugle with—*ugh!*"

Old Pap Weatherwax grinned grimly as he saw by the flashing through the eyelets that the mask was losing his temper. And there was still further evidence of this fact in the sharp, harsh tones of the latter as he demanded:

"Who are you, anyhow? What brought you to this part of the country? What is your name?"

"I'm a white man by profession, an'—"

"You lie!" with sudden ferocity. "You're a bloodhound—a detective!"

"You can't prove it," drawled the ancient, lazily.

"Can't I?" with a hard, metallic laugh, as the mask suddenly drew a hand-mirror from his bosom and stooped forward, holding it up

before the face of his captive. "Take a look into that and satisfy yourself, my noble sir!"

Without a change of countenance or the slightest trace of annoyance, Old Pap Weatherwax obeyed, gazing steadily at the homely reflection, turning his face from side to side, thrusting out his chin or drawing it back again, like one who felt he was viewing a rare work of art, and wishing to make himself familiar with every detail.

"Well, what do you say now?" impatiently demanded the mask, as he drew back the mirror.

"Say?" echoed the ancient, with conscious pride. "That ef you was hafe as good-lookin', you'd stan' a heap better show o' makin' a mash 'mongst the pettycuts!"

"Bah!" with a short, bitter laugh. "Impudence will not save you this time, you bloodhound! Your disguise is a good one, but it would not stand the rough usage the boys gave you in taking you into camp. They tore your wig and false beard partly off. Or will you still deny that you are disguised?"

"Deny nothin'! Why should I?"

"If you are an honest man, why hide your real face?"

"Honest be durned! Whar'd you run 'crost that word? Who give you a knock-down to it? You ain't honest, I hope; yit you take mighty good keer to kiver your sweet mug! 'Fraid o' spreadin' an epidemic o' cholery ain't ye? Honest is good!"

"I'll give you one fair look at my face before we play quits, never fear," was the significant reply. "But you have not answered my question: why are you in disguise?"

"Waal, ef you must know, I come from a mighty onhealthy kentry the las' time, whar throat diseases hed a mighty oncomfortable way o' takin' off patients o' jes' the ole man's caliber. I see the durned 'nihilator hed its eye onto me, an' so I levanted in a hurry. Fer fear it'd foller an' freeze onto me, I did what natur' wouldn't do; sprouted a baird an' made a thick kiverin' o' ha'r grow onto a bald pate."

"In plainer speech, you fled from the hangman or Judge Lynch?" demanded the mask, sharply, his keen eyes riveted on that placid countenance as though seeking to read what lay beneath the surface.

"You said it, not me," with an indifferent yawn.

"And thereby uttered a lie false as Hades itself!" cried the mask, with sudden fury. "You are a detective, come sneaking here in search of your prey! But instead of finding the golden reward for which you would drag a fellow-being to a shameful death on the scaffold, you will find a grave!"

"Ef I do, putt me into a rosewood coffin with silver han'les an' a dinner-plate on the top side! Lay a bunch o' white rosebuds an' modest vi'lets onto my manly buzzom, an' when the cold clay is tromped down over me mortal remains, keep my grave green, ef you love me, pard!"

With tightly clinched hands the masked man glared at the cool speaker, seemingly tempted to leap upon him as he lay and tear him limb from limb. But then, with an evident effort he put the savage desire aside, his voice cold and sneering:

"You play your cards for all they're worth, but they are too weak to save your stake in this game—and that stake is your life! Cunning as your disguise is, thoroughly as you have played your chosen role thus far, you have lost. I know who you are. I know what object brought you to Good Enough. I can utter your name if—"

"Don't do it! fer the love o' heaven, stranger, don't do it!" huskily gasped the old man, casting a swift, apprehensive glance around him, as though fearing the very walls would catch up the dangerous syllables and make them known to the whole world.

"That touches you, does it?" sneered the mask.

"It do—it tetches me deep!" muttered Pap Weatherwax, his voice growing a little more steady. "I never think they was a man or woman sharp enough on this footstool to see through my disguise, as you say you've done!"

"Shall I prove my boast? Shall I shout your name aloud?"

"Do it, an' I'll die with my lips closed so tight crowbars nur di'mon' drills couldn't open 'em!"

"Bah!" with a scornful laugh. "What care I for that? It is not your silence, but your speech, that might hurt, were it to be poured into living ears outside of this room. We will guard well against that happening, never fear!"

"Then, durn ye! spit it out, ef you kin, which I mightily misdoubt," growled the ancient, settling back moodily.

"You are a detective, out here in quest of—of certain people who are set down as being criminals. You came from St. Louis. You are a pet of the National Detective Agency, under Chief Albert J. Stiles, and your name is Frank Deckwright!"

This last sentence was spitefully uttered, for as he keenly watched the effect of his words, the masked man could not help but notice the

expression of dread which at first marked the face of his prisoner, slowly change to a look of vast relief, ending as that name was pronounced, in a broad grin.

"Great hoop-snakes! how you do exprise a pre critter, anyhow! An' that's the sort o' kitten I be, eh? An' mebbe you mought be one o' them fellers this—I'm huntin', I guess!"

"Whether I am or not, will be a matter of utter indifference to you long before our interview ends!"

"That tells the story plain enough, an' now I see I bain't got nothing to fear from you, ef I do let out my mighty secret," laughed the old man, bubbling over with relief. "Len' me your top fly-flippers, an' I'll sing a song into them that many a 'tective'd give his right duke fer to drop onto!"

"You can't throw dust into my eyes, by your clownish tricks. I know you're the man I named. But I'll listen."

"Then—now don't you dar' to give it away, or I'll come back from my grave to ha'n't you ferever more amen!"

"Out with it—I'm listening."

"Come closer, then—so! Now fer it. I'm Kate Bender!"

With a dramatic whisper and an air of exaggerated tragedy, the ancient hissed out this preposterous assertion, then leaned his head back against the stone wall, placidly eying his captor as though curious to note the effect of his words.

A gleam of angry disgust came into the eyes of the mask, but he choked out his anger before speaking. Then his voice was cold and merciless.

"You have had your say, and now comes your punishment."

Uttering a low whistle, the trap-door above his head opened and a rope ladder was dropped down. Two men descended, the last one handing his mate a chair. At a sign from the chief, the burly ruffians grasped old Pap Weatherwax and placed him in the chair, binding him firmly to it, then fastening a gag between his jaws. At another sign, they climbed up the ladder, drawing it after them, then closing the trap-door again.

"Now, Frank Deckwright, bloodhound, man-hunter, liver on the head-money offered for men often more sinned against than sinning, your race is run! Such men as you, are a blot on the face of an otherwise fair earth, and it is no sin to wipe you out of existence."

"You came here to capture and drag back to death or life-long imprisonment, men as far above you as heaven is above earth. Instead, you will find the grave of a dog, after dying a dog's death! Bloodshed has no terrors for you, as your deeds this day and night have plainly proven. For that reason I will neither blow your brains out nor slit your throat. Instead—" and as he spoke he produced a sponge and flat flask containing a colorless liquid.

Drawing the cork, he poured a quantity of the liquid on the sponge, and then pressed the latter to the nostrils of his helpless victim, adding:

"I will chloroform you first. When your senses have fled for the time being, you will be removed from the cellar to another underground apartment, where my men are at this moment engaged in digging your grave, and there buried alive!"

Recognizing the peculiar odor of the drug as soon as the flask was opened, the old man collected all his powers of mind and body, resolved to fight against its influence as long as possible. He was not wholly unacquainted with the drug and knew that there were some few constitutions which it would not affect in the least; while others were able to baffle its effects by the exercise of a powerful will. Believing it possible that his might be among the number, he bent all his powers to fight off that benumbing sensation.

With a low, sneering laugh the mask saw this in his rigidly fixed muscles, and pressed the saturated sponge still more firmly against his nostrils.

"You fight well, Frank Deckwright, but it is all in vain. You must breathe, no matter how long you hold your wind between. I have plenty of time, and do not lack for patience. If this flask does not contain enough to put you to sleep, I'll send for a fresh supply. So! you begin to feel sleepy, eh?" and he laughed with a fierce malignancy.

"Think—while you can! Think of what it will be to recover your senses as you lie in a narrow box, your arms tied to your sides, unable to move a muscle—powerless to do anything but—think! To know that death is creeping over you by inches! To feel the little air within your coffin growing hot and foul and poisonous! To note the terrible change until each breath you draw is like inhaling liquid iron at a white heat! Think of all this, I say, and then remember the fellow beings you have hunted to death without a gleam of pity or thrill of mercy! Think of what they must have suffered as they saw the bloodhound gaining, running them down to death!"

He poured more chloroform on the sponge and pressed it to the nostrils of his failing vic-

tim. Yes, failing! despite his desperate efforts to fight off the influence which he knew would end in death, the prisoner was yielding to the awful drug. The frightfully malignant voice of the masked man sounded fainter and less distinct. His shape seemed to recede and at the same time grow marvelously large, with horns on its head and—that was all! Oblivion came, shutting all out!

CHAPTER XIV.

PROBING AN OLD WOUND.

THERE was a pall of gloom resting over the house of Marcus Tudor; gloom and anxiety and bitter unrest.

In the chamber and on the bed of his betrothed bride, lay Milo Vincent, hovering between life and death. Prayerfully as the grim old physician was entreated to give a favorable opinion—to say that his patient would recover—he dare not. The scales were too evenly balanced. The added weight of a breath either side might cause that in which the fiat of fate rested to sink or rise. He had done all that lay in his power and now they could only wait and watch.

For two days Milo Vincent had been lying there, motionless, pale as though already a corpse. The shot which he managed to fire before unconsciousness again overcame him, was heard and the cause investigated by a curious party. They discovered the body, and for a time believed that death had been before them; but then some one more critical than his fellows, detected faint traces of life remaining, and old doctor Winegar was sought for with all possible haste, a number of devoted friends, with Don Bobtail Pandango at the head, remaining on guard with ready weapons, lest the assassins should return to complete their bloody work as soon as the news should reach their ears.

And then, when the two ugly knife-cuts were properly bandaged, and the flow of blood stanch-ed, the unconscious foreman was carried to the house of his employer, where he lay yet.

After the first wild outburst of grief, Zurilla Tudor brought her emotions under control, and kept them there with an unyielding will for which no one had ever given her credit. And after the first anxious day, the worthy doctor was heard to whisper confidentially across a glass of whisky, that, under heaven and a divine Providence, Milo Vincent would, if he ever regained his health, owe his life to Miss Zu, God bless her!

Looking but the ghost of his former self, having aged in outward seeming at least a dozen years during those two days, Marcus Tudor sat in his library, staring vacantly before, seeing nothing of his actual surroundings, but haunted by the dread phantoms of a past that he had counted dead and buried a generation ago.

At brief intervals he would shiver and cringe, sinking lower in his cushioned chair, trying to close his eyes, but in vain. Held by the spell which bound him from head to foot, they would move slowly around the room as though following the movements of some living being, instead of a baseless fabric erected by a diseased imagination and disordered brain.

Only for the coming of Milo Vincent in a seemingly dying state, Marcus Tudor would have attempted to escape his promised doom by precipitate flight. But he loved his daughter too dearly to abandon her to the evil power of a merciless wretch like Faro Saul, and he knew that she could not be torn alive from the ill couch of her beloved. And so, experiencing a bitter death with the passage of each hour, the mine-owner waited for the fatal hour to come.

Two days, the gambler had mentioned as the limit of grace; two days, and they were gone! Eight-and-forty hours ago, Faro Saul stood there, his magnificent figure drawn sternly erect, pronouncing his fatal threat. The time was up, and—

With a low, gasping cry, Marcus Tudor covered his eyes with his trembling hands, for Saul Oberlin pushed open the glass door which served as a window, and entered the room.

"Your humble servant, Waldo St. John!" he uttered in his rich, mellow tones as he doffed his hat and bowed low with mock respect. "I trust I see you in good health and spirits?"

With a desperate effort Marcus Tudor recovered himself sufficiently to speak:

"Bridle your jeering tongue, you insolent scoundrel! If you feel no respect for my gray hairs, at least try to respect the presence of death!"

A vivid light leaped into those jetty orbs, and there was a poorly disguised eagerness in the tone of the gambler as he leaned forward and muttered hastily:

"The presence of death? Is he dead—Milo Vincent?"

"If not dead, he is dying—and as God is my judge!" the mine-owner cried with sudden energy as a revelation seemed to flash upon him, "I believe you are his vile assassin!"

Great though his self-control, and gifted with nerve beyond the majority of his fellows, this sudden charge caused Saul Oberlin to blanch and start back; but only for an instant. Then, with a short, contemptuous laugh, he said:

"Indeed? And pray, what particular inter-

est have I in his life or death, beyond being one of his fellow-citizens?"

"Because you saw him in your path! Because you knew that as long as he lived, you could never gain your accursed ends!"

Swiftly, impetuously Marcus Tudor spoke, and even if his fierce charge resulted in nothing else, it would serve to rouse him from that unhealthy stupor and enable him to make a stout-er fight for life against his merciless foe.

"You allude to his rumored love affair with my promised bride, I suppose?" said Saul, gravely. "That has not troubled me in the least, because I knew it could never come to anything. Of course you have obeyed me—have broken that foolish connection? I do not ask you to turn the poor devil out of doors, neck and crop, but at the same time it must be fully understood that my bride is not to act as his nurse. On no other condition will I permit him to remain here."

Calmly as he spoke, there was something peculiarly insulting in both manner and tone, and the resistance which Marcus Tudor had been preparing ever since he saw that his last chance of escaping that desperate struggle was gone, burst into a flame as fierce as it was short-lived.

"You permit—you cowardly thief and midnight assassin! Begone! before I forget myself and stain my hands with the vile blood of one who—Die, you dog!"

The moment he gave way to the pent-up passions which had well nigh rent his heart in twain during those black and hopeless hours of torturing anxiety, Marcus Tudor forgot himself—forgot all save that one who held him by the throat with a grip of steel was standing before him—that unless he could break that grasp, he was doomed! And snatching a pistol from its place of concealment as he uttered that grating curse, he attempted the life of his enemy.

And with ninety-nine men out of one hundred, he would have succeeded, so sudden and unheralded came his action. But the Handsome Hercules proved the one exception, and like thought his gloved hand shot out and arrested the fall of the hammer, twisting the dangerous plaything from that nervous grasp, then pushing the mine-owner back into his seat.

"Easy, my friend," he uttered, with a cold sneer, as he gently lifted the hammer sufficiently to free that portion of his hand which had furnished a cushion of flesh to protect the primer. "Better answer for the murders you have already committed, before plunging into fresh crimes."

"Will you begone?" huskily repeated Marcus Tudor, making a strenuous effort to hold his own against the giant.

"If you insist, I will go; but let me tell you what the result will be. I will go—to summon all of Good Enough to the open ground before your doors. I will reveal to them the history of your past life—of how signally you distinguished yourself before you left England to become an American citizen. It would be a rare, rich treat to the rabble, but how think you the gentle Zurilla would enjoy it?"

With a hollow groan Marcus Tudor covered his eyes and lay back in his chair, conquered once more, and through his great love for his daughter.

In her eyes, his life was spotless, without blur or blemish; at least it had been before that unlucky hour two days ago, when she surprised the parting threat of the gambler. How could he bear to have this merciless demon tear the veil from his bloody past and tell the story of those terrible days? It would be bad enough, toned down by a kind friend: from his lips it would prove far bitterer than death! Poor Zurilla, whose trials were already sufficiently severe, how could she bear the terrible, the shameful revelation?

"Well, I hardly thought you had the gall to persist in such a suicidal course," laughed Faro Saul, drawing a chair opposite the mine-owner and seating himself. "You show your wisdom in hauling in your horns a trifle. Why should a fine old gentleman like you play dancing-jack before a swarm of howling, hooting idiots? Why cut off your graceful old age by helping the hangman to twist his good-night neck-tie? Bah! that would be worse than folly, and we'll have none of it!"

"Instead, we will bury the black past so deeply that the trump of Gabriel will fail to resurrect it on the Last Day! You will gracefully intimate to Milo Vincent—if the fine young fellow should be so lucky as to recover from the dastardly assault made on him by that ragamuffin, Weatherwax—that, though he's mighty good-looking, he can't come into this nice little picnic; in less poetical language, give him his walking papers with a kick and a blessing!"

"Never! I cannot—it would kill her, poor child!" muttered Marcus Tudor, in a voice that showed how bitterly he was being punished for the sins of his earlier days.

"I'll run the risk, and you'll have to. The little bird belongs to me, if not by rights of discovery, at least as a partial recompense for the time and labor I have spent on ferreting out

you and fastening that tragedy on your head. I will make her happy, never fear. One month with me, and I'll guarantee to blot the very memory of this bread-and-butter love affair of hers from her record of life."

"Better death than that!" with a flash of spirit which was even more painful to witness than his supine wretchedness. "She an angel, you—it is too, too much!"

"There is but one other alternative open to you," was the cold, merciless retort. "Either Zurilla marries me, by her own free will or else induced to do so that you may be saved, I care little which; or else I proclaim to all the world your past history and have you arrested on the charge of murder."

"It is a lie—false from beginning to end!"

"Is it? Shall I repeat the pleasant tale?"

"You can't prove it—you cannot fasten the deed on my shoulders!" muttered Marcus Tudor, hardly conscious of what the words were that dropped from his trembling lips.

"Don't flatter yourself with that vain belief, my dear fellow," smiled the gambler, settling himself more comfortably in his chair and lighting a fresh cigar. "I can prove every letter of my charge. As a little flyer—listen:

"Twenty-odd years ago you lived in London, and your best friends knew you as Waldo St. John. You had a nice little business, a modest fortune already stowed away, thanks to a wise and frugal father, and your future looked very cheerful indeed, though there was one thing lacking to complete your happiness, as you imagined. That was a wife.

"For a year or two back you had been keeping an eye open in hopes of seeing some lady whom you would like to fill that vacancy, and at last you believed you had succeeded. You met, courted and married a young girl—"

"False there, as in all else!" muttered Marcus Tudor, his trembling hands clinching tightly, a reddish light filling his eyes. "She was older than I, in years as in sin!"

"Man-like, you seek to cast the blame on her shoulders!"

"Her first word was a lie—so her last word, look, action! She was false and base to the very core!"

The words dropped in a monotone from the livid lips of the mine-owner, who was seemingly unconscious that he had an auditor until the strong hand of Faro Saul fell upon his shoulder, shaking him back to a semblance of his usual self.

"Be careful, Waldo St. John!" the gambler hissed through his tightly clinched teeth, his black eyes glowing like those of an enraged serpent in the gloom. "You will have to answer for all this, and slandering the innocent dead will not serve to make your punishment any the lighter!"

"You married her, and took her to your home. For a few short weeks you were happy, but then you began to show the cloven hoof. Did the poor child look at a man across the way, you cursed her for it, and accused her of infidelity, in mind if not in person. You nursed your vile suspicions until your jealousy became absolutely unbearable. You made her life a torment, and what might have been a happy, peaceful home, a veritable hell on earth!"

"A hell, true enough," bitterly muttered the mine owner; "but not of my making! From the very first day of my bringing her home, she began to tear the love-scales from before my eyes. I could have loved her—I did love her, else I would never have given her my honored, stainless name! But she would not have it so. She drank, she lied, she swore, she scoffed at everything pure and holy, and as often as I would try to recall her to a sense of decency, she would fall into a fit of pretended hysterics, and alarm the whole neighborhood. And when the neighbors would rush in, she would fall to sobbing—bah! why tell it all? Her cunning was equal to her impudence, and both were born of the devil, her sire!"

"That is your side of the picture; but your old neighbors show the reverse in very different colors. They say that you gave the poor child not a moment's peace, save when you were fast locked in a drunken stupor. They say you were jealous without the slightest cause; that you led her such a life of wretchedness and misery, that they frequently wondered she did not kill you, or go stark crazy; that you taunted, insulted, beat and reviled her until her spirit was so broken you would no longer pretend to trust her."

"I did trust her until I could blind my eyes to the bitter black truth no longer!" cried Marcus Tudor, hoarsely.

"Wait; when I am through then you can take your turn," said the big blackleg, coldly, with a wave of his gloved hand.

The mine-owner sunk back again, breathing hard, his face deeply lined, his frame shaken by repeated shivering-fits.

"Your evil thoughts brought their own punishment with them. You were not content to charge her with infidelity, but you longed to discover that which would make your shame patent to the whole world, even as you began to believe it yourself. You told lies, you laid traps—"

"And caught my game, too!" hissed the old man savagely.

"You made an excuse for a brief absence into the country, and when you parted from your wife, for only a week, as you took good care to make her believe, you kissed her—the kiss of a modern Judas."

"If so, the result more than justified the deception. If you know so much you must know that as well," slowly muttered the bunted man, too deeply agitated by the revival of the black past to see what fatal admissions he might be making.

"I do know; more, perhaps than you will be anxious to believe," was the swift retort. "You went away, and after disguising yourself, came back to watch the house. You saw nothing to reward you the first night, but on the second you saw a cloaked figure steal into the building, and waiting a time to make all sure, you entered by means of your latch-key, and stealing on tip-toe to the room from whence you could detect the soft sound of voices, you burst open the door. You found your wife in company with a man, a stranger to you, and without giving either of them time or opportunity for explanation—"

"What I saw was explanation enough, God knows!"

"What did you see? What did you hear? Let me tell you," and the gambler, rising from his seat, stood before the mine-owner like a vision of revenge and retribution.

"You saw your wife in the arms of a stranger. You saw him kiss her, and saw that instead of recoiling from his caresses, she returned them with equal ardor. You heard him call her pet names. You heard her say that she loved him better than aught else on the face of the earth. All this you saw and heard as you looked and listened at the key-hole."

"And was it not enough? Do you wonder that my brain gave way—that for the time being I was a raving madman?"

"Wait! You burst open the door, and leaped upon them like a maniac, knife in hand. You cut and stabbed—you refused to listen or show mercy—you never gave over until they both lay at your feet, covered with blood, dying!"

"I was justified—more than justified in punishing them, even with death! Think what I saw—what I heard—and she my wife—I her husband!"

"And he her brother!" sternly added Saul Oberlin.

With a choking cry Marcus Tudor leaped from his chair, staring wildly into the dark, handsome face of the gambler; but then he sunk back again, with a feeble attempt at a laugh.

"Bah! she had no brother living, or I would have heard of it in some way. You only say that to torture me the deeper!"

"He was her brother, and my father," slowly uttered Faro Saul. "Weak, luckless, easily influenced by evil associates, but still my father. A criminal, perhaps, but even now I will not deny him. In that one point, of keeping his existence a secret from a jealous husband, your wife was to blame. But even that was hardly sin sufficient to be repaid with death at your hands, Waldo St. John!"

With a desperate effort the mine-owner rallied from the crushing blow thus delivered, and his lips parted to speak, when Saul turned to the window, opened it and waved his white silk handkerchief in the manner of a signal.

With a new fear grasping his heart, Marcus Tudor gasped:

"What do you mean by that, you villain?"

"You have repeatedly said that I could not prove your identity as Waldo St. John and your connection with the tragedy of which I have given you a brief outline. I said I had a witness who could identify you and prove all my charges. You scoffed at the idea. Come—" and he grasped him by the arm and led him to the window. "See for yourself, Waldo St. John!"

The figure of a woman, clad in black from head to foot, was slowly passing before the house, and as Saul Oberlin uttered a low whistle, she turned until she fronted the window, throwing back her heavy veil, exposing her face to the full glow of the setting sun.

From the moment he caught sight of that figure, Marcus Tudor turned stiff and rigid, his breath coming in short, husky gasps, his face livid and ghastly. But, when that veil was lifted and he saw the face it had until then bidden, he was seized by a convulsive shivering, and would have fallen but for the strong grasp of the gambler, whose gloved hand as swiftly closed over his lips to stifle that gurgling cry.

And as the woman passed on, he carried his victim back.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HANDSOME HERCULES AS A RESURRECTIONIST.

WITH one hand jealously guarding those pallid lips, Saul Oberlin bore the mine owner back to his seat, the glow of a devilish exultation filling his eyes and showing through the hot flushing of his cheeks as, through his slightly separated fingers, he distinguished the faint, shivering grasp:

"Merciful Father! can the grave give up its dead?"

Reclining the stricken man in his easy-chair, the big sport hastened to the sideboard and snatched up a decanter of brandy, with a glass, returning to the side of his victim.

Though he felt no more pity, no more compassion for the stricken wretch than he would for the helpless worm that shivered and died beneath the grinding of his heel, Saul was not ready to loose his grip of steel. His game was not yet securely won, though so far everything had run in his favor. Until the winning card was played and the last trick turned, the life and sanity of Marcus Tudor was very valuable to him!

With skillfully applied force he obliged the mine-owner to swallow a heavy draught of the strong liquor; then, filling the hollow of his hand from which he removed the neat glove, Saul bathed the face and temples of his victim. Thus he kept up his efforts until the tortured man began to breathe with freedom and regularity again; then his air of anxiety vanished, and he became once more the merciless master.

"Ay! Waldo St. John," he said, with a harsh, pitiless deliberation that made each word seem like the stab of a poisoned knife to the sorely afflicted mine-owner—"when a man of my caliber sets his mind and heart on gaining any particular end, the grave itself must yield up its contents to bear witness in his favor, if naught else will serve his turn. You doubted my power; what think you now?"

"You are the devil! A merciless, pitiless, torturing fiend, fresh from Hades!" muttered Marcus Tudor, feebly striving to drive away the waking incubus that paralyzed his mind and body alike. "If I sinned, have I not suffered? Ay! suffered ten thousand deaths in life! Not a day since that fatal night has passed but I have lived over that age of torture! Not a night but what I have seen her—pale, ghastly, red blood gushing from her throat, her bosom!—but what she has visited my bedside and taunted me with my misery! Think of this, and then say I have not atoned, if ye dare!"

"An eye for an eye—blood for blood!" sternly uttered the gambler, watching his victim as closely as a cat watches a captive mouse, and with much the same feelings, or his black eyes and gleaming teeth belied him greatly. "Think of the woman whom you so basely butchered! Think of the man who had never wronged you in deed or thought, cut off in the very prime of life by your savage steel! Think of me, deprived of my only relatives—of my father and his sister! For their sakes, above their graves I have sworn to avenge their wrongs on your head; for the sake of your fair daughter I am willing to perjure myself in their sight. For a father and an aunt, give me a wife, and all will be well. Refuse—well, I believe I have hinted at the hangman and his tie, before."

The mention of his loved child served to rouse the mine-owner, and with more energy than he had shown since that spasmodic attempt to free himself from the toils by slaying his arch enemy, Marcus Tudor cried:

"It is all a cunning trick! Or, if that woman was her, then your power is gone! I did not know! But that you victim, you have overreached yourself this time!"

"Have I?" coolly laughed Faro Saul, without betraying the slightest trace of annoyance. "And the man my father! what of him? You forget that there were two innocent victims to your insane passion and keen steel, that night. Even granting that the woman escaped your fury, which I have not yet done, you would still be a murderer and ripe for the hanging!"

Marcus Tudor once more sunk back in his chair, his short-lived exultation changing into a sullen apathy. Outwardly, at least, he seemed to be in much better condition for resisting the deadly grip of his merciless foe, but then the Hercules was not a man to despair while a single card remained in his hand, and he steadily pressed the point he wished to gain.

"I have been wonderfully patient with you, Waldo St. John, because I wished to make the rifle without letting the world into our secret. Not that I care for myself, or even for you; but it will be hard enough for Zurilla to know that she is the daughter of a murderer, without the additional pain of feeling that every one, man, woman and child, with whom she may come in contact, shares that shameful knowledge. Act sensibly, and she need never know the whole story. Remain stubborn, and I swear that I will call together the entire town before your door, and make the startling revelation in tones so loud and clear, that even though she refuse to desert the bedside of Milo Vincent, she cannot help but hear all!"

"On the other hand, submit quietly, sensibly, to the inevitable; go with me, if you still doubt, to the spot where that woman is waiting for our coming, to forever solve your doubts; meet her face to face, and then see if there is any earthly method of escaping the gallows, if we choose to press our advantage. Do this, and then I will repeat my offer. Will you?"

"No," sullenly replied the mine-owner. "It

is another of your diabolical traps! I'll never enter it!"

"Nay, my dear sir," with a tiger-like purring, "do not be quite so hasty, or you may see cause to bitterly regret it. If you refuse to pay this lady the visit she is expecting, within a certain length of time, she has instructions to return here, with substantial witnesses. There will be a lawyer to take down her accusation, and witnesses to prove it when the time comes that sees you in the criminal dock. And one of those who will be summoned to repeat the tale that woman will tell to us here, will be Zurilla, your daughter—so called!"

"What do you mean by that? She is my daughter!"

"No doubt. It was a slip of the tongue. I meant to say—never mind, just at present. Time enough to spring that mine, when you positively refuse to bear me company."

"I have refused—do your worst!"

"I fear you hardly realize just how bad that worst is, my dear fellow! It will prove you an assassin. It will prove you Waldo St. John, on whose head a heavy reward has rested for twenty years and more. It will prove that you had a living wife when you married the mother of the fair Zurilla."

"A lie—a lie!" gasped the mine-owner, with a convulsive start that told how deeply this shaft sunk, how bitterly it rankled.

"And even more: it will prove that, instead of being your legal heiress, Zurilla will be worse than nameless; for, Waldo St. John, Althea Pennoyer not only survived your savage assault, but soon afterward gave birth to a child, which is still in the land of the living!"

Keenly the gambler watched the effect of this thunderbolt, expecting to see his victim shrink and cower beneath it, the last remnant of resistance crushed out of him forever; but he was doomed to disappointment.

The mine-owner stared at him with an incredulous look, and then shook his head with a dogged determination.

"You go too far, now, Saul Oberlin. There is a limit even to my credulity, and I can't swallow that!"

"Come with me, and you shall have proofs of its truth."

"Bah!" with a faint laugh. "You despair of driving me to meet your terms, and so you think to decoy me into a still closer trap? You mean murder, Saul Oberlin!"

The angry look vanished from the eyes of the Giant Gambler, and he smiled pleasantly as he made reply:

"I would lose by that, my dear fellow, and when, I play a game for big stakes, it is to win. Dead you would be worth nothing to me, were my proofs of your past crimes tenfold as strong as they now are. Zurilla would never sacrifice herself to keep a mere name clean, even though that name was once worn by her father. She would bid me defiance, weep a few tears, perhaps, over her shattered idol, ending by convincing herself that it was a case of mistaken identity, and throwing her sweet self away on that empty-pated Milo Vincent."

"Living, you are my touchstone which shall turn all to gold! Man alive, I would fight for you even as a father would do battle for his first-born! But if you still doubt me, I'll give you yet another chance. You haven't paid Billy Whistler for his claims yet?"

Marcus Tudor slowly shook his head. Though the money which came so near costing Milo Vincent his life was intended for that purpose, the bargain had not yet been completed. First came that crushing shock to the mine-owner, then the attempted assassination of the young foreman. These had driven all business thoughts out of his head.

"I thought not," nodded the gambler. "Well, you know that Billy is no very great lover of your humble servant. Not to put too fine a point on it, he hates me as the devil is said to loathe holy water, and would take many a long step to catch me foul."

"Come with me. On our way we will take the trouble to hunt up Mr. Whistler; that will not be difficult, for the honest digger has his regular beat for each hour of the night. Bid him have his papers ready for the transfer at any hour you may choose to name for the morrow. Warn him to be punctual to time. And then, in a casual way, let him know that you are going to pay a call in my company. I will drop in a word or two which will make Billy mighty eager to look me up, if by any chance you should fail to keep the appointment."

"If I refuse to take all this trouble?"

"You will not, since it is the only show for you to keep your secret from the ears of your daughter. Decline, and true as I am now talking to you, all of Good Enough shall know you as you really are, before another hour has passed over your head!" sternly cried the giant.

Marcus Tudor could see that this was no idle threat, and once more that ugly shivering came back. With an effort he rose from his chair and crossed the room to the sideboard, pouring out a glass to the brim with strong brandy, swallowing it at a single gulp. Then he turned again, saying:

"I will go with you. At the worst you can only kill me—and death is preferable to what I have undergone during the last forty-eight hours."

"Now you show your good sense!" said Saul, with a smile and a nod of approval. "I don't want to treat you too harshly, but I've got my points to make, and I would be an arrant fool as well as a mighty poor gambler were I to throw away a single trump. To show you how sincere I am—see!"

Stooping over the desk he wrote rapidly for a few moments, then handed the slip of paper to the mine-owner.

"Read that, sign it, seal it up and direct it as seems wisest to you. Leave it here, or give it to any person you choose, bidding them open and act on its contents should you not reclaim it at a certain time—any hour after midnight."

At a single glance Marcus Tudor read the words:

"I am going on a short trip with Saul Oberlin. It may be that evil is intended, that I may be decoyed to my death. If I should not be at home at nine o'clock to-morrow morning, I will be a dead man, and I charge Saul Oberlin with murdering me."

"If that is not sufficiently plain, write a note yourself in terms to suit, sign, seal and leave it where or with whom you choose," Saul suggested.

Without a word in reply, Marcus Tudor sat down and wrote rapidly for a few moments. Placing the paper in an envelope, he closed and sealed it with his signet ring. Placing this in his breast, he picked up his hat and said:

"Lead the way and I will follow. Find Mr. Whistler before you take me to where—to the place you spoke of."

Saul bowed, then led the way through the open window and toward the town.

The night was just settling over Good Enough. Lights were springing up in every direction, and the miners were beginning to roam about the place after their supper.

"At this hour, Billy Whistler will be seated on the veranda of the hotel, smoking a cigar after his grub," remarked the gambler, lightly. "Or, if there is any other gentleman with whom you would prefer to leave that bottled lightning, you have only to say the word."

"Mr. Whistler will serve my purpose," replied Marcus Tudor, on whom the repeated draughts of brandy had worked a beneficial effect.

"Just as you say. It is only an empty form, of course; but if it will ease your mind in the least, that is reason enough for taking the useless precaution," added Saul.

True to his prediction, Mr. Billy Whistler was discovered in front of the hotel, his feet propped high against a post, his rusty plug hat pulled far over his eyes, lazily enjoying the fumes of a not-over-choice cigar.

With equal truth, Saul Oberlin had said that there was no love lost between the genial Billy and himself, and the moment his approach was discovered, the former dropped his feet to the floor, pushed back chair and hat, one hand dropping to the polished butt of a revolver at his hip, ready for business should such be on the docket.

The Handsome Hercules showed his teeth as he noticed these warlike precautions, but it was only in a lazy, indifferent smile as he placidly uttered:

"Not this evening, Billy; some other evening!"

"Whenever you choose," was the cool retort. "I'm easily found, and when found, always open to business."

"Glad to hear it, for, if I mistake not, my friend, Mr. Tudor, has a word or two to say to you, on business."

"I will not detain you long, Mr. Whistler," hurriedly uttered the mine-owner. "As you know, my affairs have been all upset by the sad accident which has overtaken my business manager, and for that reason I have failed to live up to our agreement."

"The same reason prevented me from calling on you at the appointed time, my dear sir," politely replied the other. "I felt sure you would not feel like completing a trade, under the circumstances, so concluded to wait until you sent me word. Your own time will suit me, be it now or next week."

"To-morrow, then, at nine o'clock, at my house. And, by the way, may I trouble you to take charge of this paper? It is of importance, and any great delay might be fatal to the business it concerns. If I am absent from the appointment just made, will you oblige me by opening the envelope and acting promptly on its contents?"

"With pleasure," bowed the other, taking the paper, though there was an air of perplexity in his movements which he was unable to entirely disguise.

"It may possibly be of service to you, in such an emergency, Mr. Whistler, to bear in mind that our mutual friend was taking a little walk in my company this evening," said the gambler with refreshing candor.

"I'll remember, never fear," with a sharp nod that spoke far more than his mere words contained.

"At nine o'clock to-morrow morning, if you please, Mr. Whistler," repeated the mine-owner.

"I will be there as the clock strikes, never fear."

Bowing, the two men turned away; Billy Whistler watching them with a wondering light in his big blue eyes. There was something so curious and out of the ordinary run in the whole transaction, that he was strongly tempted to follow them and see what it resulted in; but then Billy remembered that he was a gentleman, and carefully placing the envelope in his breast-pocket, he resumed his chair and his smoke.

"Are you satisfied now?" asked Faro Saul, when they were fairly beyond earshot of the man on the veranda.

"That you do not mean murder, yes," was the deliberate response. "That you have some treacherous end in view, yes, again."

"Whatever I may have in view, be sure I mean to carry it out to complete success," was the cool retort.

Marcus Tudor made no reply, and no further words passed between them until after they gained a small house which the mine-owner knew had been until very recently unoccupied, its owner having met with an accidental death in one of the mines.

Saul rapped softly at the front door, which almost immediately swung open, as though the visit was anticipated.

No person was visible, keenly as the mine-owner looked, nor was there the sign of a light about the premises, and a cold thrill ran over his person as the Faro Prince muttered:

"Shall I lead, or follow? Take your choice."

Steeling his shaken nerves as best he could, Marcus Tudor crossed the threshold. Saul immediately followed, and the door swung shut behind them with a sharp click that told of a spring lock. At this sound, all the fears and suspicions of the haunted man returned, and with a little cry he shrunk back only to feel the steel grip of the Giant Gambler on his arm.

"Be quiet!" came his voice, hissing. "There is nothing for you to be afraid of, as yet. Silence, and wait!"

"Welcome to my house, Waldo St. John!" uttered a voice from the darkness; a voice sweet, mellow, pleasing in its cadence, but which sounded to the mine-owner more terrible than the bitterest curse!

The next moment a faint light flickered and sputtered, then grew into distinctness as it was applied to a lamp. And standing beside the light, Marcus Tudor beheld the black-robed figure of the veiled woman whose appearance an hour or two earlier had given him such a stunning shock.

The dim light now fell athwart her face; a face pale as that of a corpse, lined and haggard, until it seemed that of a woman past the prime of life, yet retaining traces of more than common beauty. Her eyes were dark, and gazed steadily into his face from their shadowy sockets.

It was the ghost of the past. Though the resemblance did not seem nearly as strong as it had when he first saw her through the open window, Marcus Tudor could not deny it.

"You, Althea—or your ghost?" he gasped, shrinking from that steady gaze, trembling in every limb. "Can the grave give up its dead before the Day of Judgment?"

"Not dead, but living, Waldo St. John," said that same cold, stern, yet musical voice. "I am your wife, whom you tried to murder, long years ago. What I have suffered during that long, dreary period, pray that you may never know!"

"Althea, alive—not dead! It cannot be!"

"I am alive, come to you to say—peace or war, St. John?"

"Peace! I've never known that since I first met you!"

CHAPTER XVI.

QUEEN TITANIA LIFTS HER MASK.

SLOWLY, heavily, his lids partially unclashed. Like one still in a dream he gazed around him as far as he could without bending his neck. To do that, it seemed as though he had neither the power nor the inclination.

So far as his limited range of vision extended, all was of a somber black, dimly lighted up by some, as yet, invisible torch or lamp. From floor to ceiling, and even stretched across the latter, the drapery reached; and as his eyes mechanically dropped, they saw that the floor was also covered with the dismal, lugubrious material. And in it all there was not a trace of color to break the depressing monotony.

Though the hangings seemed to slowly move at times, with the peculiar, tremulous waves which one sees in a field of green when a gentle breeze is blowing, not a sound, not the faintest breath of fresh air came to the nostrils of the man who lay back in his chair, motionless, save for his slightly opened eyes, as though death had already claimed him for its victim.

A few moments thus; then the eyes opened more widely, a faint tinge of color came into the ghastly-pale face, and a barely perceptible shiver crept over his figure. Then—so low and

faint as to seem more like breathings than words, he muttered:

"Where am I? Is this death, and the grave? How came I here? What has happened?"

The faint muttering ceased, as though even this much of exertion had exhausted the death-like man. But it was only in outward seeming. With the passage of each instant, strength and memory were returning to him. The misty cloud which overhung the past, was lifting, and instead of that dull, listless air, his eyes were beginning to glow and sparkle as they roved more rapidly around him.

He saw a long, narrow mound in one corner of the black-draped apartment, but could not define it accurately, since the same sable covering hid its details from scrutiny.

"Ha! I remember now! The devil lied! I did not die! I still live!" came from his lips with startling distinctness as he made an effort to leap to his feet.

But the chair to which he was bound resisted his struggle, and a cold, mocking laugh which just then echoed through the chamber, caused him to desist.

And then, parting the sable curtains, a medium-sized figure stepped into view. A black mask covered its face. A blouse served to disguise the shape of the body, and the hands were incased in gloves.

"Welcome back to earth, Frank Deckwright!" uttered the masked man, with a jeering, mocking cadence to his voice that was only too familiar to the ears of the now thoroughly awakened captive.

"Deckwright be durned, ye p'izen scallawag! Let up on your callin' me out o' my name, or when I git my flippers free ag'in I'll make ye think John L. hes drapped down onto ye fer a holy picnic."

"You still persist in that stubborn folly? You will deny that your name is Frank Deckwright, of St. Louis?"

"Waal, ef you ain't honey, then you're the durn'dest fool I ever see!" snorted the prisoner, in tones of utter disgust. "Think a white man don't know his own name best?"

"He had ought to, but the tongue does not always say what the mind knows. To give you one more chance, you have been reprieved from the grave, which already yawns for you. If you are stubborn, you will enter it alive! If you prove tractable, and your judges can see their way clearly to such an act of clemency, you may even be saved altogether. At least you will be dead before you enter the tomb."

"Mighty kind an' siderate, ain't ye?" with a feeble grin.

"Considering the many black marks which are placed opposite your name on our records, I may say I am. And now to business. Remember the penalty of lying. Who are you? What is your name? Why did you come to Good Enough in disguise? Who are the persons you are hunting down to death?"

"I'm Old Pap Weatherwax. I'm a ramblin' rack-about, whose body goes pretty much whar his legs choose to Kerry it. I came here 'ca'se I didn't go nowhar else jest at this time. An' you don't need to go into mournin' fer them as I hunt down to death, 'less you're a 'lution to fleas or graybacks."

"You are willing to take an oath that you are the man you claim? You would swear to this on the Bible?"

"Ef you kin hold one sech out, an' it don't raise a holy blister onto your claws, I reckon I could take oath to the tallest lie mortal man ever 'vented, an' never faze a ha'r!" was the grim retort.

With a malicious laugh, the man in the mask stepped closer to his prisoner, saying:

"Fortunately I have a more thorough test than that. A man of your profession feeds on lies, false oaths and perjury. You would hardly scruple to add one more item to the long catalogue. But—behold!"

As he spoke, the masked man suddenly removed a wig and pair of false whiskers from the prisoner, leaving his face bare and fully revealed. Dropping the mass of shaggy hair, he held in one hand a photograph, in the other a small mirror, thrusting both directly before the eyes of the ancient.

"Look at one, then into the other!" he cried, triumph in his every tone. "Dare you swear now that you are not—Death and the devil!"

"I only wish I wast!" coolly retorted the prisoner, seemingly taking that fierce, baffled impression for the legitimate ending to the query. "Either way I'd ram-jam some good loss sense into your calaza, or bust it wide open in tryin'!"

The masked man started back, dropping both photograph and mirror, staring at the face of the prisoner as though a death's head had suddenly risen before him. And little wonder!

The voice, the figure, the dress—all was the same; but the face from which he lifted the cunning disguise was altogether different—was that of a man whom he had never seen before! This, or else it was truly the work of the foul fiend!

"Sit o' fickness tuck ye, I reckon!" chuckled the prisoner, in a tone of mock sympathy. "Takes the shape of a cholery mortgage, don't

it? Feel like ye had jumped outside of a corkscrew, I shouldn't wonder! Folks will git that way, sometimes."

The masked man tore down a lamp from the opposite side of the room, rushing back and holding it close to the face of the prisoner, staring savagely into it, growling like an infuriated wild beast. Then he snatched up the fallen photograph and glanced swiftly from it to the face.

The picture was of a moderately good-looking man in the prime of life, dressed at the time it was taken in clothes of a semi-official cut. A heavy mustache shaded his lips, but otherwise the face was smooth-shorn.

Until the instant when he tore off that hairy disguise, the masked man would unhesitatingly have taken his oath the two faces were identical; that his prisoner was none other than the man there pictured. But now!

There was not the most remote resemblance, in feature, in outline, in any one respect. In the picture, the chin was square and firm; in the man, it was pointed, a little receding. In the picture, the eyes were truly set, keen and piercing; those of the man had a slight, though unmistakable obliquity of vision. And so it was with each feature as they were taken and studied in detail. Though the difference might be but slight at a casual glance, the closer it was examined, the more pronounced it grew. And with a grating curse, the masked man hurled the photograph aside, saying:

"You cunning devil! try as you may, I will trap you yet! I know that you are Frank Deckwright, and that is a recent likeness of him. You have altered your countenance until your own mother would forswear you, but you can't keep it up forever! Sooner or later we'll catch you napping!"

"Waal, now, you do take it powerful hard, don't ye? A durn shame to pester a 'greeable cuss like you, it jes' is! Thar, honey, don't worry over it. Ruther then make you suffer sech misery, durned ef I don't resk a lie or two! I'm Frank Deckwright, pictur' or no pictur'—so thar! Does it make you feel any more salubrious, hon.?"

"Even your impudence will not save you," said the masked man, recovering his wonted composure with a visible effort, picking up the photograph and carefully placing it in his bosom once more. "You are Frank Deckwright, let your face be that of a devil or of an angel!"

"Ef you're so dead sartin', why in thunder an' guns don't ye prove it, then?" coolly demanded the prisoner.

"It is proven!" cried a deep, mellow tone, as the curtain parted once more and two figures entered the apartment.

There was no possibility of mistaking at least one of the twain. No other man in all that region could boast of such altitude, combined with such perfect proportions. Though a mask of crape covered the face to the tip of the jetty imperial, Faro Saul, the giant gambler of Good Enough could not be mistaken for any other man.

His companion was like an infant beside a full-grown man, when compared with his gigantic bight and breadth. As with him, a mask was worn, while a loose robe of black disguised the form it covered, but seeing them in company, any citizen of that mining-camp would not have hesitated long before pronouncing the name of Queen Titania, the woman faro-dealer.

Old Pap Weatherwax stared placidly at the new-comers, not a trace of fear or anxiety showing in his eyes or on his face. Instead, he seemed disposed to make a jest of the occasion, for in a drawling tone he uttered:

"The big man an' the little woman! When is the rest o' the menadgery comin', mister?"

Faro Saul made him no reply, but turning to the other man, he motioned one hand toward the point where he had parted the curtains in entering, saying:

"You can go. I will attend to the rest. Keep within call in case you should be needed."

Bowing low, the man left the apartment.

With arms folded across his chest, the Hercules stood for some moments gazing steadily into the face of the prisoner, who placidly returned the compliment. His face was still that revealed by the first man, and the peculiar squint still marked his organs of sight. If not his natural countenance, then he was proving himself an actor of extraordinary skill and nerve.

"This bids fair to be a losing speculation of yours, my dear fellow!" at length said the gambler.

"I want to know!" ejaculated the prisoner, his eyebrows uplifting after a peculiar fashion. "You don't say!"

"You are a bold, cunning, gritty bloodhound, but this time you took hold of a contract bigger than your caliber justified. Better for you had you been content to rest on the many laurels already won. Then your name would have been remembered with pride by your fellows, and pointed out to your successor as that of one who never lost a trail when once he had taken the scent—who never yet reached out for a victim but he held his grip

until the law relieved him of his prey forever. A proud boast, for one of your kidney; but as nothing succeeds like success, so nothing damns a man sooner than failure. Make one false step allow yourself to be outwitted for a single time—and all that went before is forgotten; only the bit of botch-work is remembered. And thus it will be with you, Frank Deckwright!"

"Nother 'stallment from a crazy-house, or I'm a yowlin' liar!" muttered Old Pap Weatherwax, with a snort of utter disgust. "Durned ef I don't leave sech a cussed kentry, ef I hev to steal a pa'r o' wings fer to tote me away!"

"You play your part well, bloodhound!" sneered the big gambler, his black eyes flashing through the eyelets in his mask. "But it is of no use. I have looked upon your face when you little thought of such a thing. It was by my orders you were taken prisoner and brought here, though at first it was only a strong suspicion that actuated me. It was by my orders you were questioned so closely in that other room, for I hoped to break down your will and extract a full confession from your lips before killing you."

"Which the p'izen imp got, but he wouldn't b'lieve it, don't you think!" ejaculated the ancient in a tone of injured disgust. "I tole him who I was, an' 'manded he should treat me 'cordin' to my sect; but he wouldn't. He went as far as to say I was a durned liar right from head-waters!"

"You persisted in denying your identity."

"I didn't nuther!" indignantly. "I tole him, cam'ly, confidentially, that I was Kate Bender, jest w'arin' the trowserloons fer a change; but he laughed at me—the onmannerly critter!"

"It was by my orders that you were chloroformed, when no other means would serve. And it was really my intention to bury you alive, rather than run any chances, when you were saved as by a miracle. A letter came to me from a pard in St. Louis, warning me that Frank Deckwright had left for the West, and that he believed the trip concerned me intimately. In that letter was a photograph of the human bloodhound. With it in my hand, I paid you a visit, just as my orders were being put into execution. You were dragged from the grave, and the false wig and beard soaked off your face. Then, with you lying before me like a corpse, I closely compared the two faces. You had sacrificed your mustache, but that did not alter your face so much as to make the recognition at all difficult. True, your eyes were closed, and when I pried up the lids, the balls looked dim and glassy; but the other points were quite sufficient. Beyond a doubt you were the living original of the photograph, and resolved to extract the whole truth from your lips, I had you bound to this chair and left to recover your senses. When you did so, my man confronted you with the picture, but he must have played his cards clumsily and let you divine his purpose, for you have changed your features until, had I not taken those precautions, even I might have been deceived!"

"Say, you!" uttered Old Pap Weatherwax, in a tone of awe, as the gambler ceased speaking. "Do you know all that by jes' your nat'ral supply o' wind, or hev ye got a talkin' fact'ry inside you? Ge-lawsey! what a powerful 'zorter you would make fer a camp-meetin', ef on'y you wasn't sech a turrible onregenerated sort o' critter!"

A low, musical laugh parted the lips of the masked woman at this impudent speech, and even Saul Oberlin made some show of joining in.

"You will find that I can act as well as talk, my dear Deckwright," he said, significantly.

"Still that name? Fer sake o' happiness, cain't you give us a teenty little rest?" begged the prisoner. "It's gittin' too durned mosquito-barry fer any use!"

"You still deny that your name is Frank Deckwright?"

"D'ye want me to tell a lie?" indignantly.

"To keep from telling one, rather. But it matters little whether you make the admission or not. As I told you when I first entered, your identity is already proved. Not alone by the photograph, though that satisfied me fully; but here is a living witness that you are Frank Deckwright. Queen Titania!"

As he pronounced this name, the woman removed her mask, gazing steadily into the face of the prisoner, who as intently returned the look. For some minutes neither spoke.

It was a beautiful face into which Old Pap Weatherwax gazed, just then. Only that the face seemed a trifle thinner, the color less pronounced, while the hair was almost jetty black, cut short and worn in little curling locks, the face was that of the fair young pilgrim who played such a peculiar part in the stage coach tragedy, two days before!

"Do you dare deny your name now, you perjured traitor?" at length cried Queen Titania, her dark eyes flashing with a fire that seemed as though it would scorch whatever it fell upon. "You are Frank Deckwright, the right bower of Albert J. Stiles, the chief. You are a bloodhound by profession, even as you are one by in-

stinct. I know you—to my sorrow! Dare you deny the truth of what I say?"

"Not so long as you w'ar the pettycuts, ma'am," with a bow as profound as the nature of his bonds would permit. "I'm gittin' pritty well 'long in years, but they's too big a streak o' perlitiness left in my compersition fer that!"

"Bah!" with a flash of bitter scorn that caused her eyes to glow like fireflies in the dark. "You try to evade the point. Look at me closely. Turn your memory back a little, and then say whether or no you ever met me before."

"It don't take sech a mighty stretch fer that. I hev see'd ye afore, an' mighty glad I am to see ye ag'in."

"Yet you deny that you are Frank Deckwright?"

"What has that got to do with it?" in a tone of surprise. "You didn't go by that name then, an' I'm mighty sure I didn't. Then you was Miss Stella Timberlake; a pritty name with a dog-goned pritty little woman fer ter kerry it, ef I may say so 'thout givin' no 'fense! An' a mighty 'cute trick you played fer to git hold o' them ducats, too! Pity you didn't give the ole man a hint in time. We might 'a' gone in cahoots!"

"You will never live to repeat those words!" with a little oath beneath her breath as she turned abruptly away from the prisoner. "Saul, I ask one favor of you: give me this man to deal with as the fancy strikes me!"

"On one condition."

"And that is?"

"That you swear truly you will not give him his life."

A short laugh parted her red lips; a laugh that was musical enough in itself, but carrying with it a threat that could not have been more plainly expressed in words.

"Give him his life? That perjured traitor? If you knew all! I will tell you, some day, but not now; the story is too long, and I could not tell it in his presence without driving my dagger to his treacherous heart before the end was half reached! To see him die I would almost be content to lose my own life the next moment!"

"I don't ask to know your past, as connected with him," was the cold reply. "We all have our little secrets, and I shall never try to penetrate yours. You may kill him."

With a low, fierce cry, Queen Titania flashed a slender dagger from her bosom, and with it raised, she crouched as for a leap upon the man who sat helplessly bound to the chair.

CHAPTER XVII.

QUEEN TITANIA USES HER DAGGER.

BUT the death-knell of Old Pap Weatherwax had not yet tolled, and before the arm of the beautiful fury could drive that bit of flashing steel to the heart of the bound and helpless man, Saul arrested her with his steel grip.

"Not yet, Queenie! Don't be in such a hurry to cut short the silver cord," he said, half-sternly, half-laughingly.

"But you said—you told me I might deal with the vile dog as I saw fit!" panted the fury, ceasing her vain struggles and shooting a sullen glance from the corner of her eyes up into that masked face.

"So you shall; but not just yet. The fellow has got to do some tongue-wagging before he flits up the golden stair."

"I thought you had tried that until you were disgusted?"

"I set out to make him squeal, and I never give over a mark once set up until it is hit," was the short, savage reply. "If he won't talk, when he can talk, then we'll try to make him talk, if we have to outdo the deviltries of the Indians themselves! Ay! Frank Deckwright!" turning with a malignant ferocity on the prisoner; "unless you limber the muscles of that stiff neck of yours, you'll have good cause to think that the days of the old-time inquisition have returned for your especial benefit!"

A hard, metallic laugh came from the small, red lips.

"If he is to be tortured, I guess I can control my impatience. How is it—rack or thumb-screw?"

"Ef you'll give the ole man a say-so into it, he'd a heap ruther be kissed to death by the Maiden," coolly interposed Old Pap Weatherwax, a quaint twinkle in his crooked orbs. "You could act the part o' the maiden, honey. They ain't no fun in these sort o' games unless them as takes part does a powerful heap o' make b'lieve, an' they won't none o' us laugh fer to putt ye out."

The words were innocent enough in themselves; but there was an underlying sting hidden in them that caused the face of Queen Titania to flame crimson, while one clinched hand crept up to her bosom where nestled the gleaming dagger.

Saul glanced swiftly from one face to the other, but then shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"From the way you two spat back and forth, one could almost believe that, instead of being a maiden, Queen Titania had been a wife, with you, Frank Deckwright, for a lord and master!"

"Not so bad as that!" impetuously burst from

the lips of the prisoner, his brows uplifting with such an expression of mingled horror and devout thankfulness that despite themselves both Saul and Queen Titania broke into a laugh.

"Durned ef I see anythin' to giggle at!" muttered Old Pap Weatherwax, blinking at them owlishly. "The good Lawd knows I'm got low-down enough, without tryin' to couple me to the likes o' her, an'—"

Queen Titania leaped across the space which divided them like an angry cat, striking him across the lips with her little hand, cutting short his uncomplimentary speech.

"Silence, you bloodhound!" she hissed, her face flaming, her black eyes all aglow with rage and insulted pride. "Dare to breathe one word against—Bah!" with a little laugh and shrug of the shoulders as she fell back once more; "I'm an idiot to mind your empty ravings. What matter! Pour forth your foul slurs and hints. It is but a few short minutes you have to live, and if you prefer to spend them after that fashion to praying for the peaceful repose of your soul, what care I?"

"You tell! Durned ef I kin see what fer you two take sech a p'izen nasty int'rusion into the ole man, *anyway!*"

"Don't you think that trick is worn thread-bare by this time, Frank Deckwright?" coldly asked the Hercules, removing the mask from his handsome face. "You are wholly in our power, and without our consent, all the detectives and peace officers in the whole world couldn't save you, even if they knew right where you were. You are doomed to death as surely as sparks are born to fly upward. You will never leave this apartment alive. Your grave is dug—see!"

Striding across the room, the giant gambler lifted the black cloth from the oblong heap, revealing a rude pine coffin resting beside an open grave.

Twisting his head partially around, Old Pap Weatherwax stared owlishly at the grim sight, then nodded shortly.

"Yas, I see. Tuck a heap o' trouble, hain't ye? Tromped your weasel-skin out flat, didn't ye, payin' fer that splendidous rosemahogebo-cottobempine-wood casket? Live on bread an' water fer a month, won't ye, to make up fer the cost o' them trimmin's? Good Lawd! what ginorous critters you big-an'-little of it air, anyhow!"

"You will rest as easily in that pine box as you would in the richest casket, my dear fellow," lightly retorted Saul. "It is not the dress that makes the man, remember. But as I was on the point of observing:

"There is no possible hope of escape for you. Your doom is as certain as though the worms had already feasted on your carcass. If not, think you I would have revealed myself to you after this fashion? Think you I would have admitted that it was by my instructions you were captured and brought here—since Milo Vincent was killed at the same time?"

As he uttered this last sentence, Oberlin watched his prisoner keenly, but a shade of disappointment passed over his face as he failed to detect the slightest trace of either surprise or anger. It was as though Old Pap Weatherwax had never heard that name before.

"And not only that; if I had not known your escape was absolutely impossible, would I have admitted to you, as I virtually have done, that I was the prime mover in that attack of road-agents on the stage? Or have shown that I had cause to fear the coming of a detective from St. Louis?"

"It does make a kind o' loud smell, don't it?" innocently commented the prisoner.

"And if you need still further proof—listen: I admit that my name is not Saul Oberlin, but only donned for a time and purpose, as I have worn a score of different names in my time. Among them that of Walter Du Barry, the one in which you, as Frank Deckwright, should feel the deepest interest."

"I want to know!" muttered the prisoner, as the gambler ceased speaking to gaze keenly into his face, evidently with the purpose of noting the effect of this confession.

"Bah! you do know! But you shall not have even that poor excuse to hide behind. You shall have nothing save your own craven fear to justify you in denying your real name."

"As Walter Du Barry I shot like a meteor across the best circles of St. Louis society. I was handsome, rich, polished, when I chose to be, and above all I had a spice of the devil in my composition that captured the hearts—or fancies—of the society belles, just as surely and easily as my lavish expenditure of money took the young male bloods captive. I was a king, and right royally I ruled, too!"

"Fears like I've hearn tell somethin' o' that," slowly uttered the prisoner, with a cat-like glance from his crooked eyes. "They was a fight, or a muss o' some sort, wasn't they?"

"Just as though you hadn't the whole history at your fingers' ends, you whining hypocrite!" cried Saul, contempt ringing in his mellow tones. "But run to the end of your rope—why not?"

"Yes, there was a muss, over the card-tables at the Club. Some one accused the king of foul

play, which, if true, might have accounted for the enormous stakes he had won for the past few nights, as well as on that evening. It was an idiot who uttered that charge, but it was hardly across his lips when he had even less brains. And with the brains passed away his life, accompanied by a goodly portion of his egg-shell skull!"

"Jes' so; you blowed his cabeza wide open," nodded Pap.

"Of course, since he publicly charged me with cheating; not but what the charge was true enough, but it was too openly made. And before that little seance was over, the brainless rascal had three companions in misery. Not to put too fine a point upon it, I cleaned out the whole company, emptied their pockets into mine, and then levanted. Of course I knew St. Louis would be rather too warm for comfort, after that, and before daylight I was out of the city."

"You went alone, o' course?" half-questioned Pap.

"Of course you know I didn't do any such thing," was the cool retort. "I never do my work by halves. I had two strings to my bow, and was working them both for all there was out. I had planned an elopement with a romantic—and very rich—damsel for that very night. It was my haste to clean out the bloods before the appointed hour that made me show my cloven foot too plainly. And when I left that little seance, it was to rush to the fond arms of my adorable!"

"I knew that suspicion would fall upon me, though we had taken every precaution to keep our seances private, to avoid unpleasant collisions with the law and its guardians, whose keen noses, thanks to the Johnston law, were poked everywhere they scented gambling. Of course there would be the devil's delight kicked up when that little slaughter-house was opened, and it was quite as much to give the papers and society something else to curse me about, as through love for her or longing for her money-bags that I carried off the blushing damsel that night."

"It was a mighty 'cute trick," slowly uttered the prisoner. "It throwed dust into 'most everybody's eyes, ef I remember right. Anyway, the newspapers never mixed your name up with that little game o' cards an' cold steel."

"You were one of those few exceptions, I believe, Frank Deckwright," pointedly exclaimed the giant gambler. "If not, then I was wrongly informed by my friends at head-quarters. They said that you declared that in finding me, the whole mystery would be solved. Am I not right?"

"How shed I know?" innocently ejaculated Old Pap.

"True, I forgot," with a mock bow of apology. "You are Epaphroditus Weatherwax, general rack-about and dead-beat bummer—exactly! I most humbly beg pardon—of Frank Deckwright! At least, he was a gentleman; would I could swear he was not the most bare-faced liar I ever encountered, but that would be soaring into the realms of the impossible!"

"And the girl?" softly uttered Queen Titania, who had been listening very intently to the careless confession of her gigantic companion. "What became of her, Saul? You never whispered aught of all this to me!"

"Why should I?" was the blunt, rude retort. "You have your little secrets, into which I have never attempted to pry; why should not I the same?"

"Durn the man that snaps the nose off the face of a woman, even ef she ain't a angel with full-grown wings!" sharply exclaimed Old Pap Weatherwax, his eyes flashing indignantly.

"Perhaps you will satisfy her curiosity, my dear fellow?" smiled Faro Saul, his black eyes glowing vividly.

Was it only mockery, or was it a trap which he was cunningly setting to catch the game which had thus far laughed his utmost efforts to scorn?

"Deed I jes' will, then!" promptly ejaculated Pap, nodding his head vigorously, seemingly unsuspecting of any snare. "What of the young leddy, you ax, mum? It kin be putt mighty short—not sweet, though, pore child!"

"Never mind her name, nur yit her fambly: ef you're so curious as all that comes to, the papers o' that date'll tell you all them p'ints. They hed a powerful sight to say over it all, fer news is news, an' people will hev it all, no matter how deep each line cuts into the heart o' some pore critters who hev heavy enough load to bar 'bout that, a body'd think!"

"She was young an' han'some an' high-bred; but it didn't serve to save her from the spoiler—wuss luck! She was tuck in by his high an' mighty ways, jes' as her folks an' lots o' other folks was, an' she thought the sun rose an' set into his pocket, I reckon. Anyway, when he axed her, she said she'd 'lope 'long o' him, an' when the time come, she did it, money an' jewels an' all the valuables she could easy tote; plenty enough to set up a dozen solid games o' faro."

"Waal, nigh a year went by without any word comin' from the runaway gal; then a letter 'riv' that had mere sorrow to the same 'mount

o' writin', I reckon, then any other letter her folks ever 'ceived afore. She hed a baby, but she hedn't no husban'. She never hed none. The p'izen cuss she give up all fer, played her dirt from the very jump-off! She was desarted, without money, sick, in a strange town, a thousand miles an' more from home. She said she only axed fer money to bring her home, to die. Ef it would be sent by telegraph, she would try to hold out until it come."

"The han' o' fate was in it, I reckon, fer somehow that pitiful letter was delayed 'long the road, an' it was two or three weeks old afore they got it. An' the name that was signed to the letter, to which the money was to be sent, was the same name her folks hed read at out into the papers that very mornin'. It told how she killed herself an' her baby, rather than see it starve to death!"

"An' that's what come o' the gal, mum!"

"True as holy writ, as far as it goes," declared Saul, with a hard, pitiless laugh, his eyes glowing like those of an evil spirit. "You forget one of the most interesting points, though, my dear fellow! You omitted to say that the young lady was once very sweet on Frank Deckwright; indeed, some say they were engaged to be married, before she ran away with a handsomer man!"

"In that you lie, Faro Saul!" cried the prisoner, his voice, tones, and even expression undergoing a complete and startling change. "She was a very dear friend, but nothing more. I loved her as a sister, and I swore to be avenged on the merciless demon who drew her to ruin and death!"

A mocking laugh followed this fierce outburst.

"At last, Frank Deckwright! Where is your cunning mask now? I thought that little confession would bring out your real character, and I was not mistaken!"

"Don't flatter yourself, Faro Saul," was the cool, even response. "I intended dying under my own name and face, from the very first. I only wished to prove to you that you could neither scare nor trick me into an admission before I was ready to let drop the mask."

"Have it so, if it pleases you best," was the careless retort. "You admit, then, that you are Frank Deckwright?"

"Yes. There is no reason why I should longer deny it."

"And the oath you took—the vow to never know rest until you had brought me to account for her death?"

"Will be kept, just as surely with me in my grave as with me alive and at perfect liberty," was the grave response.

"Bah! you think to stuff that down me?"

"Doubt while you can, if that pleases you. The day will come, and that right soon, when you can doubt no longer. I have laid the toils carefully, and you cannot take a step to flee without tripping yourself up. If I am not there to pull the trigger, my partner will act for me."

"You lie!" with an involuntary glance around the room, as though he suspected the presence of eavesdroppers. "You only say that to cover your own failure. No court in the land can touch me for her death, and us three alone know what part I played in that little jamboree over the cards."

"Hug that flattery to your bosom while you can. The hour of your waking will not be long delayed."

"At least you will never see it!" cried the giant gambler, his pent-up passions finding full vent at last. "You have dogged me long enough, and this hour ends your death-hunt forever! I only waited to make you confess your name and identity. This you have done, and I have no further use for you."

"But I have!" suddenly cried Queen Titania. "You promised me I might dispose of him as I chose, and I claim the fulfillment of that promise now!"

"He is yours, provided that you give him no show for his life. Kill him, and I will stand by without lifting a finger; but it must be done now and before my eyes."

Queen Titania placed a tiny silver whistle to her red lips and blew a thrilling call, which was almost immediately answered by the appearance of a tall figure in a black mask, who bowed, then silently awaited her orders.

"Release that fellow from his chair, and conduct him to the edge of that grave, yonder," she said, coldly.

Without a word the masked man obeyed, untying the strong cords which held the detective to the chair. The instant the thongs dropped from his person, Frank Deckwright made one vigorous effort to escape, but ceased as abruptly on finding that his limbs were still firmly bound.

"Carry or drag him to the grave," added Queen Titania, as her satellite glanced toward her for further instructions.

Stooping, the masked man raised the detective in his arms and bore him over to the oblong pit. Placing him on his feet, at a sign from Queen Titania he forced him to his knees, holding him thus while the faro queen advanced, confronting him like a death angel, her voice

ringing out clear and musical, yet cold and merciless:

"Frank Deckwright, at last fortune has given me the boon for which I have hungered these many long, weary years! When we last parted, it was you that stood proudly, scornfully by, while my knees were bent. Now the tables are turned, and you are about to meet the fate I swore should be yours if ever you fell into my power. You said then, that you would give me time to repent; I say now, take five minutes in which to say your prayers and make your peace with Heaven."

Not a word came from the lips of the doomed man. Not a tremor shook his frame or caused that steady gaze to waver from the face of the woman who thus coldly pronounced his doom.

With jeweled watch in hand, Queen Titania counted off the minutes, and when the last second of grace had fled, she replaced the jewel, plucked the dagger from her bosom, placed one hand on the shoulder of the bound man—then struck straight at his heart with a fierce, hissing curse!

The hot blood spurted out over her hand, and casting the crimsoned dagger into the grave, she staggered back with a hoarse, gasping cry, averting her eyes, only saved from falling as she staggered against Faro Saul, whose arms closed around her instinctively.

A gurgling groan, and the head of the murdered detective fell forward, while Faro Saul hurriedly said:

"Make sure he is dead, then bury him. Come, Queenie!" and supporting her, he left the sable apartment.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANOTHER TURN OF THE SCREWS.

WITH almost indescribable bitterness those words fell from the lips of Marcus Tudor, and he seemed to be recovering from the shock which the reappearance in the flesh of the woman whom he had so long believed in the grave, had given him.

There was more color in his face and his lips. The wild, haunted look was fading from his eyes. His movements showed more strength and vitality. His voice was steadier. And Faro Saul frowned deeply as he bit his thumb, for he began to fear that his bold game would not be so easily won, after all!

The woman confronted the mine-owner as he uttered that sentence, and a low, bitter laugh parted her lips.

"And I, Waldo St. John? Think you mine has been a bed of rose-leaves since the evil day on which your eyes first marked me out as your prize? If you think you have had cause to regret that day, I should never turn back to it in memory without shedding tears of blood!

"I was so young, so childish, foolish, perhaps. I do not deny but that I had my failings: the best of mortals are not absolutely perfect. But if this was my last hour on earth—if the penalty for the slightest deviation from strict truth was death in its most loathsome and frightful shape—I would still swear that living man never had a truer, more loving wife than I fully intended to be to you, from the first."

"What a pity our good intentions are so short-lived!"

This sneering comment never affected the pale-faced woman in the least. She confronted the mine-owner, her dark eyes gazing steadily into his, her voice steady, monotonous, more like that of a senseless automaton than aught of flesh and blood.

"As Heaven is my judge, I loved you then, Waldo St. John—loved you as I hope few women are weak enough to love those into whose merciless hands they place their all! I believed all the sweet perjuries you whispered into my ears while you were yet uncertain whether or no you would succeed in trapping the bird you wished to place in your gilded cage. And when I took on me those solemn vows, it was with a holy, peaceful joy words can never describe. I loved and trusted you. I believed you felt the same toward me, and had an angel from heaven come down to show me what a frightful change a few short months was doomed to work, I should have laughed the prediction to scorn. Such was my faith in you. And how was it rewarded?

"By the harshest suspicion. By bitter wrongs and still more bitter insult. By degrading epithets and at last even by blows! Ay! Waldo St. John! Deny it if you can!"

With dark and lowering brow Marcus Tudor listened to her steady, measured speech, but when she concluded with that sharp defiance, he spoke, also in quiet, measured tones:

"The past is dead. Let it remain so. Believe me, it will be better for both you and I if the ashes are not disturbed."

That calm, even voice seemed to irritate the woman. Her composure vanished, and with her eyes flashing, her slender figure drawn proudly erect, her voice rung out sharply:

"And I, Waldo St. John? Am I to have no recompense for all that I have suffered through your abominable temper? Am I to receive nothing in return for my ruined life? for the shame and obloquy and physical sufferings you heaped upon me?"

"You?" hoarsely cried the mine-owner, his face hotly flushed, the big veins starting out on his temples until it seemed as though the skin must burst. "What was your suffering in comparison to mine? Before I met you, I was happy, contented, rich, respected by all who knew me. You came, and all was changed. Everything that made life pleasant and good to live vanished. I became an outcast, an assassin in the eyes of those who had loved and honored me. And for what? A woman who betrayed me almost before she had entered my house."

"But let that pass," he added, suddenly regaining partial control of his passions and moderating his tone. "The past is dead, and we are both fools to think of restoring it to life. You are still alive, instead of filling the grave I have for so many years believed. Be thankful for that."

"It is no thanks to you that I am not dead and moldered to dust," bitterly retorted the woman.

"No. I struck to kill. I would do the same again, were those black days to be lived over."

"Ah! Waldo, had you only been open and frank! Had you only trusted me a little while longer!" murmured the woman, making a movement as though she would take his hand between both of hers; but the mine-owner foiled the attempt, swiftly shifting his hands behind his back.

"I trusted you too far at the start, and in that lay my one great fault," he muttered, harshly.

"You refuse my hand? Well, perhaps it is better so," said the woman, her voice once more hard and even. "After all, sentiment would be out of place between you and I, at this late day. And yet—you must listen to my defense."

"For which purpose, no doubt, you retain your bully-bodyguard," sneered the mine-owner, with a glance toward Faro Saul.

"Never mind me," the giant gambler said, listlessly. "I have heard the story so often that it has no excitement for me. When the preliminaries are over, and you come down to pure business, then I may have a word or two to say."

"Though so many years have passed since that day, you cannot forget, Waldo St. John, that I told you there was a secret page in my history which must be, for a time, at least, kept sealed even from you. And you told me that you would patiently bide my own time for the revelation. Thus was the last scruple removed, and I wedded you."

"Now I will tell you what that secret was. I was not an only child, as you believed. I had a brother, nearly double my age when you wooed and won me. He was wild, reckless, but not utterly bad, else I should never have loved him so passionately as I did, had he been doubly my brother."

"He got into trouble, a year or more before I met you, and under an assumed name, he was convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for ten years. That was my secret; I had a convict brother whose name I had never dared whisper to you!"

"If I was wrong in concealing this, my punishment was heavy enough, Heaven knows! Time and again I tried to tell you what was troubling me, but as often was I foiled. Sometimes you would playfully check me; at others, your cold and suspicious air frightened me from the confession. If I was wrong, surely you were not entirely blameless!"

"Well, the end came at last. My brother escaped from his prison, and came to London to hide, until he could see me and procure means by which he might make his escape to another land. And it was at this time that your brutal jealousy made my life a very hell on earth! You were so fierce, so wild, so ugly in temper and action that I feared to tell you the truth, lest you denounce my poor brother to the authorities and give him up to suffer death—for he solemnly swore he would never return to prison alive!"

"Then, you told me that lie about being called out of town on business. I was only too glad to believe it, for at last I had secured enough money—part of it to my shame, I admit having stolen from you!—to pay his passage to America and so I sent him word to come. He obeyed. In tears we were taking our last fond embrace. He was begging me to flee with him, to make a new home and lead a new life across the sea—when you burst in upon us."

"You did not give either time to utter a word of explanation. You were a madman and left us both, as you believed, dead. And when I next returned to life, it was in an asylum for the insane, five years after that terrible night!"

Her voice had been growing strained and husky, and now it failed her all at once. She shuddered violently, covering her eyes with her hands as though in the effort to shut out some terrible sight.

Straight and erect, cold and stern, Marcus Tudor stood before her, uttering not a word. And in a few moments she seemed to conquer her emotions, uncovering her face and resuming her story, speaking swiftly, as though eager to get through:

"It was a long time after that before I re-

covered sufficient strength to hear the truth, but at last I wrested it from those who had charge of me."

"My brother was killed outright, never speaking a word after you stabbed him to the heart and then almost severed his head from his shoulders. He was buried in the Potters' Field. They did not tell me then, but I afterward learned that he had been recognized as an escaped convict. At first it was thought he had attempted robbery, for money and jewels were found scattered beside us; that I had surprised him, and in killing him, had received my own terrible wounds; but the truth soon leaked out, when it was discovered you had fled the country without settling up your business affairs."

"I could tell them nothing coherent, for my brain was turned. They sent me to a hospital, where my hurts were cured; from there to the insane asylum."

"When I was released as cured, no one could tell me aught of your whereabouts. A verdict had been found of murder, and a reward placed on your head, dead or alive. That reward has never been claimed, nor removed."

"And of course you at once set about trying to earn it!" sneered the mine-owner.

"I lost no time in trying to discover your hiding-place, be sure of that," was the swift retort. "You were outlawed, as the murderer of my brother, yet I yearned to see you once more. Well," after a brief pause; "you do not ask me why?"

"That is a query that answers itself," was the cold retort. "It was not through love, for you never had heart enough to experience such a human passion. It was not revenge, for you knew you were the one who committed the greatest wrong, not me. Consequently it was money that urged you on."

"Reasoned like a second Solomon!" laughed the woman, unabashed. "I did want money—I do want money, even more than I yearn for revenge. The love I once felt for you has changed to bitterest hatred, and I could witness your death with positive delight; but after all, that would make poor recompense for all I have endured through my connection with you."

"I have found you after all these years, and I find you a rich man, well able to pay for the privilege of ending your days in peace instead of at the end of a rope. Yet I will not be extortionate in my demands. I only ask enough to support me in decency for the remnant of my life."

Coolly, methodically, Marcus Tudor seemed to calculate, and then made known the results:

"You admitted to eighteen years, when we married; say you were thirty-five—for I do not wish to be too harsh. That was twenty years ago—fifty-five years old. You are tough and wiry, but given to strong drink, to say nothing of other still more injurious dissipations. At a liberal estimate then, you can't count on living more than fifteen years longer. Put it at that figure. What do you say?"

"Oh, I'm waiting until you have reached a definite period!" lightly laughed the woman.

"Suit yourself. Being a woman of quiet tastes, too old to enjoy a very extravagant life, too worn and ugly to have expensive lovers, of course it will not require a very large amount to pay your way down to the grave. Say \$5,000 down, or an annuity for life of \$500 per year. Take your choice."

A hard, mocking laugh burst from the woman as she flung out one hand with a contemptuous gesture, crying:

"Bah! a mere flea-bite! I see that I shall have to put on the twist, my gentle husband!"

"Don't try for too much, or you may lose all!"

"I have counted all the chances, both for and against," was the cool retort. "You may bluster and kick, but when the pinch comes, you will knuckle down rather than face the gallows. \$5,000 in a lump will close my mouth for a time, but how about the child?"

"What do you mean?" slowly demanded Marcus Tudor, his voice cold and steady enough but his face paling a little.

"That while I was lying in the hospital, where your kind caresses sent me, I gave birth to a child. The fact was registered according to law, the child given in charge of a nurse, and care taken to keep a clear record concerning its career. That child was given to me when I recovered my senses, at the end of five years, and knowing that its identity might be of great importance some day, I neglected no precautions. That child still lives, and I can trace it back to its birth, without a single flaw or weak spot in the record."

"Your child, possibly; but mine?" with a hard laugh. "That might not be so readily proven."

"It was born in lawful wedlock; even to this day you have never passed through the formality of a divorce, possibly because you believed me dead. You married again, I believe. At any rate, you have a girl living with you whom you call your daughter. I have watched you closely enough to know that you love her better than aught else, unless it may be your own sin-stained life."

"And yet, what is she? An illegitimate child, at the very best, for I am still living—and I am your wife in the eyes of the law!"

Marcus Tudor shivered, and his eyes sunk before that keen and glowing gaze. His newfound courage began to fail him, just when he required its assistance the most.

"Think what it will be to her—to the dainty, delicate darling whom you have reared like a hot-house plant in the full warmth of your love! Think what it will be to her when she learns the truth! When she knows that her loved parent is a fugitive from justice—that he is an assassin on whose head rests a heavy price! When she learns that she is a nothing—a worse than nameless girl—a *bastard*!"

With a hoarse oath, Marcus Tudor clinched his hand and would have felled her to the floor, but for the steel grip of the giant gambler, who arrested the blow, saying sternly:

"Go lightly, sir, or you'll suffer all the worse!"

"Even death coming to me, would not save you!" laughed the woman in black, malignantly. "If I am murdered, the truth will instantly be made known. No, Waldo St. John; struggle as you may, you have got to come to my terms, or else I go to the fair Zurilla and tell her all!"

"She would not believe you—I would swear it all a foul lie, and she would believe me," muttered the mine owner.

"Not in the face of the proofs I have to offer," was the swift retort. "The child is still living, and within easy reach. Unless you meet my terms, without haggling, I will take her by the hand and come to interview you in your own home. Then it will be too late to think of compromising the affair. The whole truth shall be made plain to all who care to listen. Marcus Tudor will leave the stage, and Waldo St. John come upon it, to remain until he makes his final exit at the end of the hangman's rope! How like you the picture, my gentle lord?"

Gentle though her voice, subdued as were her tones, and sweet the smile that curled her red lips, this rillery was far worse than her fiercest denunciations, and the mine-owner shivered before it like a wind-shaken leaf.

"You merciless devil!"

"If I am a devil, who made me one?" she cried, almost savagely. "Who but you, you cowardly cur! Bah!" with a short, hard laugh; "I am a fool for letting you ruffle my temper. Back to business, if you please, Waldo St. John!"

"What amount do you demand?" he muttered sullenly.

"A mere trifle," in a light and airy tone. "The \$5,000 for my own pocket, and the additional sum of \$20,000 in cash for my—I should say, *our*—daughter!"

The mine-owner uttered a cry of choking rage at the extent of this demand, and stubbornly cried:

"I'll never pay it! I'll die first!"

"You *will* pay it, and before you leave this room, darling!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HERCULES TIGHTENS HIS GRIP.

MARCUS TUDOR cast a swift glance around him, slightly changing his position so as to bring the giant gambler more in front, for he believed that that placidly uttered threat was but the prelude to a scene of undisguised violence.

Faro Saul smiled listlessly, and the woman laughed in her sweetest, yet most cutting tones as they divined his impulse.

"We are not common thugs, Waldo St. John, to employ force where simple persuasion will bring the same reward without any of the risks," laughed the woman.

"And you forget your safeguard, my dear fellow," drawled the gigantic sport, twirling his mustache. "Our mutual friend Billy Whistler must not be kept waiting when he is on time at that appointment to-morrow; as for the ducats he expects to finger, that is a horse of a different color."

Marcus Tudor flushed a little at these taunts, and it may be that the knowledge of having shown a trace of apprehension where there was no cause for fear, made his speech a little bolder than it otherwise would have been.

"You have had your say, now listen to mine. Were I to yield to this shameful demand, it would be only a drop in the bucket. You would come again and again until you had stripped me of my last dollar, and then spread your foul lies broadcast through pure devilishness. Since it *must* come to a fight, sooner or later, let it come *now*! I defy you both! Not one dollar do you wring from me, though you do your worst!"

The woman was about to speak; but Faro Saul, throwing off all pretense of indifference, stepped between them, facing the mine-owner, his voice rapidly enunciating:

"I fear you are a little hasty in arriving at that conclusion, Waldo St. John, though you cannot say that you have not had the alternative fairly placed before you."

"Hasty or not, it is final," was the dogged retort.

"Perhaps not; at least, let me give you a little good advice. Now you are a man of business.

If you had a snug sum in any stock which you were positively sure was doomed to become worthless forever, and you had the chance to do so, would not you prefer sacrificing a small portion for the sake of saving the bulk of your investment?"

"Any fool would," muttered Marcus Tudor, as the Hercules paused for the purpose of receiving his reply.

"Then a wise man should be even more prompt to act. And this is exactly *your* case, my dear sir. Pay your wife the sum she demands, and you will never see or hear aught of either her or her daughter as beggars again."

"What assurance have I that—"

"My word of honor," was the swift interruption.

A hard, bitter laugh broke from the lips of the other.

"Your word! The *honor* of a gambler, a common cheat, the ally of robbers who strip their prey with even less ceremony! Truly, you offer me valuable security!" sneered Marcus Tudor.

"I do: the very best that man can give," was the calm, unmoved reply. "It will be to my interest to see that you are not fleeced—by any other save myself. As your son-in-law, the husband of your only—acknowledged—daughter, I expect to have the felicity of handling the ducats you have accumulated, after you are done with them and this world. What better security do you want than this?"

"You have the impudence of the very devil!"

"Thanks, father!" drawled the giant sport, bowing low.

"Never that! I'd sooner father a rattlesnake!"

All traces of levity disappeared from the face and voice of the Handsome Hercules as he stepped forward and tapped the mine-owner lightly one on shoulder, saying:

"Enough of this, Waldo St. John. Let's get down to business. Put aside my own interest for the moment, and look the question fairly and squarely in the face.

"You cannot deny that you married this woman. You can show no evidence that you were ever divorced from her, or that she was ever guilty of conduct such as would even morally free you from the obligation to support her and her child as such relatives. Granting this, as you *must* grant it, and remembering all that occurred in those long-ago years, you can't honestly say that the demand she now makes of you is extortionate. Pay the sum asked—you can do it without missing it—and you will never be troubled by either of them again. Refuse, and they will plunge you over head and ears into hot water, even if no worse comes of it."

"I'll spend all I have fighting them!"

"You will never be given the chance," was the grave retort, and then Saul spoke more sharply, with more venom in both tone and words than anything he had yet shown: "Since you are determined to act the part of a bull-headed idiot, listen to me for a moment while I give you some straight talk.

"Unless you turn reasonable and come down to solid business, binding yourself to meet our views fully and without reserve, you will be killed; your eldest child will be proven your legal heiress, and publicly take the place now filled by Zurilla; I will marry *her*, and take Zurilla for a housemaid—"

A cry of fury burst gratefully from the livid lips of the mine-owner, and snatching a knife from his bosom, he struck vengefully at the broad bosom of his taunting foe!

Only to have his descending wrist caught in one of those sinewy hands and the gleaming steel arrested as suddenly as though it had come in contact with a wall of steel! Instantly the weapon was twisted from his benumbed grasp, and as the gambler caught him by the throat with one hand, the other drew back the bright blade, then struck swiftly for a point between the eyes!

Helpless as an infant in that tremendous grasp, Marcus Tudor gave himself up for lost as he saw the savage light fill those black eyes, the fierce curl of the mustached lip that left the white teeth exposed to view, and the flashing of the steel in the lamplight.

Swift and sure the weapon descended, to be checked by the Hercules when its point was barely an inch away from its mark. For a single breath the blade was held thus, then Faro Saul uttered a soft, mellow laugh, releasing the mine-owner and carelessly flinging the knife across the room, where its point was buried deep in the wall.

"Will you never learn wisdom, Waldo St. John?" he said, as he quietly faced the mine-owner, and there was strong contempt mingling with his earnestness of speech. "Have you not kicked against the pricks often enough to learn that you are but a child against a man, when it comes to a tussle with me? How many more times must I repeat the lesson? Not once!" with a sudden fierceness that carried conviction with it. "If you throw away another chance, it will be your death!"

"It will end in death—for you or for me!"

grated the mine-owner, his voice barely articulate.

"Perhaps not," in more quiet tones. "For your sake, I hope not; for when one of us has to go to the wall, it does not require a very skillful prophet to predict which one will get the hot end of the poker!"

"Bah!" cried the woman, in tones of contempt. "You chided me for cutting time to waste and expending breath needlessly; come down to solid business, or else give me the reins and let me do the driving!"

"Have patience," coldly replied Oberlin. "It is not on every bush that you can pick up \$25,000, and though revenge is precious, gold will pay for more whisky in these degenerate days.

"To you, Waldo St. John, I need say but little more. In a nutshell, your case stands just like this: There is a charge of murder hanging over your head; on your head is placed a snug little sum of blood-money. Aside from this, you have committed bigamy, no doubt innocently, believing your first wife dead and food for worms. Unluckily for you, and still more so for the charming Zurilla, Althea preferred to live a little longer, and the shifting of fortune's wheel has once more brought husband and wife together. And with that wife an elder daughter, who is plainly your rightful heiress. Only for this last fact, the problem might not be so difficult for you to solve satisfactorily; and you had ought to go on your knees in thankfulness for the chance which your wife now offers you, instead of getting on your ear! If I had not a direct interest in your coffers, rest assured I would advise her to at least double her demand in ducats!

"It may help you decide in her favor, when I confidentially inform you that not only is your eldest daughter living, but that she is here in Good Enough—that she is known to the citizens, or to those of them who class themselves among the sports, as Queen Titania!"

Until now Marcus Tudor had maintained a defiant if sullen demeanor, but at that sentence, he staggered back as though struck a heavy blow full in the face, a gasping groan parting his lips.

Queen Titania! The dealer of faro for drunken, foul-mouthed roughs! A public character, who served as one of the "attractions" to draw custom to the gambling hell called the "White Elephant!" And she was his daughter—his lawful heiress!

Sinful, stained as may have been his past life, Marcus Tudor was still proud, still tender of his honor. Above all else he loved his Zurilla, and to spare her an unhappiness, he would have thrust his right hand into the fire and held it there until it dropped from his body. Yet this gambling woman, this public character whom he had, ever since her first arrival at Good Enough, deemed the vilest of the vile, was the sister of his idolized child!

Saul smiled triumphantly as he read all this in that livid face, and he nodded covertly to the woman who smiled again. Truly, their bold game was prospering!

"It is hard for you to believe this, no doubt, my dear sir," suavely added the giant, "but with the perfect proofs which this lady has in her possession, and which I have been permitted to examine minutely, it is all susceptible of plainest proof. But it rests with you whether their story is ever published broadcast over the world, and you denounced as a fugitive assassin, or whether it is hidden from all the world from this date on. They ask but little, considering the importance of their merchandise to you. Pay it on the nail, and I guarantee that you are never more troubled with them. Refuse, and to-morrow witnesses your complete exposure. Decide!"

"I have not the money with me," faltered Marcus Tudor, one trembling hand brushing the cold sweat from his brow. "Give me time to think—to decide."

"Five minutes; not a second longer!" cried the woman, in a hard, metallic voice, taking out a watch and noting the position of the hands. "Much as I need the money, revenge is very dear to me, now that I have recalled all I suffered by and through you! Delay a moment beyond that time, and I choose revenge before all your wealth—especially as it will descend to my daughter, anyway, at your death!" she added, with a merciless laugh.

"Do your worst, then!" desperately cried the hunted mine-owner. "I have not the money with me, and—"

"You have a portion, and she will take your word for the remainder," interposed Saul. "Let Billy Whistler whistle for his ducats, until you can turn yourself around."

"Still, the money is not here, and she—"

"Feel in your breast pocket, please," laughed Faro Saul. "I fancied the lady would be impatient to finger the cash, and while I was restoring you from that little fit of indisposition, I took the liberty of placing the package in your pocket. It lay, very recklessly, on your desk, and so caught my eye."

It was even so. Marcus Tudor took from an inner pocket, the knife-pierced and blood stained

package of bills which had saved the life of Milo Vincent.

With a covetous laugh, the woman reached out her hand for them, but the mine-owner shrunk back, and the Handsome Hercules interposed.

"The time of grace has not yet expired, aunt Althea, and I have a few more words to say. You, Waldo St. John, will pay this money over to your wife. You will promise on honor to hand her the remaining five thousand before sunset-to-morrow. In return, I will give you a bond absolving you from further molestation on their part."

"To be broken as soon as her fickle fancy wills!"

"Not so. I will turn against her, in such a case, and show her no more mercy than I have thus far showed you, for then your interests will be identical with mine."

Stepping to the table, he bent over it and wrote hastily for a few moments, using a partially printed slip. Holding this up before the eyes of the mine-owner so it could be easily read, he continued:

"Here is my note, acknowledging the receipt of twenty thousand dollars from you. It is payable on demand waiving the usual notice. Take this, giving your wife the package of money you carry in your hand, and hold it as security for the scrupulous fulfillment of my pledge. I will prepare a bond, in which it will be sworn that Althea Pennoyer was a married woman, with a husband living at the time she married you. And if you prefer, it will also state that the child she claims now to be hers and yours, is really an impostor, picked up and trained for the occasion. And any other little point which you may like to have inserted as a safeguard, shall be attended to. When you are satisfied with its contents, I will exchange it for this note."

Stepping across the room, he unlocked the door, leaving it ajar. Returning, he added coldly:

"Pay the money and take this note, or refuse. Make your own decision. The door is open. You are free, and can depart whenever you choose. If you elect to keep the money and take the chances, not a finger will be lifted to hinder your departure—but to-morrow the blow will fall as heavily as our united force can make it. Decide, Waldo St. John!"

His tone and manner, even more than his words, carried conviction to the soul of the hunted man, and after a barely perceptible hesitation, he cast the package of money on the table, grasping the note with trembling hands, muttering:

"You have conquered, demons! But may the curse of Heaven descend upon your vile heads and crush you to atoms!"

The woman laughed softly as she pounced upon the money, tearing off the covering and running over the bloodstained bills with dexterous fingers.

"Now may I go?" tremblingly whispered the shaken man.

"One moment," said Saul, pitilessly. "You have silenced them, but still have me to settle with! When Zurilla is my wife, you are forever safe from the black past, but until then, I hold you under my thumb. If you fail to coax or force her to consent to marry me within the week, all that has been threatened by or in her name, shall be carried out, sure as there is a sky above us!"

Marcus Tudor staggered before this fresh blow. He saw how little mercy he was to receive at the hands of this utterly conscienceless rascal, and huskily muttered:

"You malignant devil! Do your worst! I defy you!"

A pitiful defiance, as even he must have felt, for he was unsteady as a drunken man when he attempted to leave the house. And, with a triumphant laugh, the giant gambler caught him by the arm, saying:

"I will have to see you safely back to your home, or else Billy Whistler may have to take the war-path to-morrow and go gunning for my scalp. Best foot foremost, father-in-law!"

Marcus Tudor tried to cast off his hated touch, but was unable to do so. Shaken to the very core, his strength of body and mind both failing him, he was slowly conducted home.

"One parting word, Waldo St. John. Don't try to either blow your brains out or to escape by flight, for you are watched too closely. Good-by, until to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XX.

JOHNNY WILD, THE FRISCO THOROUGHbred.

"I'm Johnny Wild, the Frisco Thoroughbred, gentlemen, fresh from The Slope, and I've come to stay as long as the Sports of Good Enough make it interesting enough to keep yours truly from going to sleep in the middle of a deal. I can trace my pedigree back without a flaw or a cross, to mighty King Pharaoh, and I've taken a solemn vow to get even with all those who mispell his name, and then tack it on a sacrilegious game of cards! Carry the news to your tiger kings, and tell them to file up the claws of their pets, for it'll be a feast or a famine with

them when Little Johnny gets through with his grand tail-twisting act! Do me proud, gentlemen! Barkeep!"

If the commencement was a trifle arrogant, the conclusion more than made amends, and when Don Bobtail Fandango, after wiping his lips and watching his recent passenger out of sight, added his commentary, it was pleasantly listened to.

"An' durned ef he ain't a thoroughbred, too, gents! The good Lawd! sech see-gyars as he kep' a-rammin' into my port-hole! An' the pocket-pistol he toted! Hope may never see the back o' my neck ag'in, gents, ef he didn't give me one dose that run clean through me so quick that it melted the nails out o' my boot-heels afore I hed time to smack my lips! It was 'stilled honey stirred up with a full-grown t'rantler's probe! Made me feel like I was a gigadier-brindle o' boss marines—nur I hain't got clean over it yit, by gum!"

It was seldom that the arrival of a single passenger created so much interest, and gave rise to so much discussion as this dashing young fellow did, but his own appearance and brief introduction, together with the enthusiastic "tooting" kept up by Don Bob, had much to do with it. And before the sun had fairly set, it was pretty well spread through Good Enough that there would be plenty of fun at the White Elephant that evening.

The usual crowd collected a little earlier than ordinary, and a low buzz of interest stirred the warm air as the unknown sport entered the gambling-hell.

And Johnny Wild, the Thoroughbred from Frisco, as he had introduced himself, was by no means an unpleasant object to look at, for those who took an interest in physical beauty and perfection.

Very nearly, if not quite, six feet in height, his proportions were those of an Apollo, rather than a Hercules, yet it was evident enough that he was gifted with enough muscular power to carry him through almost any crowd without having his "tail-feathers plucked!"

Hair so dark chestnut that it looked black at the first glance, hung to his shoulders in curling locks. A magnificent pair of mustaches, waxed and pointed, graced his face. His eyes were large, lustrous, now looking jetty black, now a deep brown as the lamplight fell at different angles across them. His skin was clear as that of a society belle, of a healthy olive or bronze tinge, through which the freely flowing blood could be distinctly noted as it ebbed and flowed.

Coat, vest and trousers were of a rich wine-colored velveteen, trimmed with broad black silk braid. A snowy shirt bosom was visible, in which glittered and flashed a magnificent cluster pin, while on his shapely white hands, other precious stones sparkled. A double chain of curiously wrought gold crossed his chest, and this alone would have proclaimed the card sport quite as plainly as though his profession was stamped in bold letters across his right brow.

The links, by the ingenious use of enamel, were made to represent a suit of cards as used in a faro "lay-out." At either end dangled a couple of dice, with diamonds inserted to represent the pips on each side. It was a curious work of art, and in itself represented a modest fortune.

Seemingly unconscious of the sensation his appearance was creating, Johnny Wild gazed leisurely around the gambling-hall, taking notes.

If he expected to see the proprietor, Faro Saul, of whom he must have heard during his brief stay at Good Enough, he was doomed to meet with disappointment, at least for a time. That worthy was very differently engaged, just at that hour.

Though the crowd gathered within the four walls of the White Elephant, was something larger than it usually was at that hour of the evening, still there was little playing going on at the various tables. A few men were ranged opposite the lay-out over which Queen Titania, masked as was her invariable habit, presided, and for whom she was dealing; but they were risking very little money, and its interest was not sufficient to keep the Faro Queen from looking up at the entrance of the stranger sport. Nor from casting frequent glances in his direction as he strolled leisurely around the room, pausing a moment or two before each table it contained, reserving that honored by her majesty for the last. And when he did pause before her table, she greeted him with a slight bow, which he returned with grace and ceremony, doffing his hat and bending his handsome head until his curling locks dropped in a half-vail over his face.

With a graceful toss, he cleared them away, and hat in hand, moved to the table, his brilliant eyes roving over the thin line of players, as though taking their caliber. If so, this was swiftly done, for he spoke almost instantly:

"Gentlemen, I never like to intrude, and if any among you have a claim on the bank, or hold a pile you are anxious to blow in, I'll wait your pleasure."

"There is always room for one more, sir," said Queen Titania, pleasantly. "Will you be seated?"

The Frisco Thoroughbred bowed again, then replied with a half-laugh:

"I am so nervous, you see, madame! With other players at the same table, I catch myself watching their game instead of attending strictly to business. I will either wait until your table is at liberty, or, if these gentlemen will not take offense at the offer, I will gladly pay each one his own price as a premium for the privilege of enjoying the entire attention of your charming majesty!"

"That you may the more certainly feel my claws?" laughed Queen Titania, with a trace of malice in her musical tones. "Remember my time is valuable, and one man is as welcome as another at this table, as long as he has money to blow in!"

"Which is my only claim to your consideration, of course, your majesty," coolly replied the handsome sport. "I took up a little collection in Frisco and journeyed all the way to Good Enough for the express purpose of closing up this establishment, according to Hoyle. It is my rule to take the best first, and hence, if these gentlemen object to giving me full swing this evening, I can wait for a more propitious moment. If they will accept a few ducats for their rights, I'll be only too happy to make the deal before proceeding to break the bank."

Queen Titania laughed impulsively, then bowed apologetically, as she said:

"Excuse me, sir, but really I could not help it! While this bank has always been a tolerably heavy one, it has increased its capital twenty thousand dollars to-night!"

"So much the better. I will receive so much the higher pay for closing it. I always detested small games; they make one so weary."

"Enough!" and there was a menacing ring to the voice of the gambler queen that told how keenly she felt that covert insolence. "Though a thousand were ready to join in the game, they should wait now until I have read you a little lesson in common politeness! Gentlemen, please draw your stakes."

"And oblige me by drinking my health," with a suave bow. "Will you honor us, Queen Titania?"

"Thanks. I never drink during business hours," was the cold response as the faro queen gathered up the cards and began shuffling them deftly.

But her refusal was the only one. Calling the white-aproned barkeeper to him, Johnny Wild tossed him a bank-note, ordering a cocktail for himself, and begging the gentlemen around to drink heartily to his good-luck; which they at once proceeded to do with a remarkable unanimity.

Daintily sipping his cocktail, the handsome sport wiped his mustaches with a white silk handkerchief, then suddenly fastened the gaze of the gambler queen, asking gently:

"By the way, may I ask what is your limit for this eve?"

"The last dollar in pocket or bank, when I take the trouble to deal for a single gentleman," was the quick retort.

"Very good. Then, of course, we will not take the trouble of using chips, as I would have to engage a porter to handle them for me, and unless I am greatly at fault, it will take all my powers of concentration to keep the run of the game and—watch your shapely fingers!"

Queen Titania flashed a swift glance at him through the eyelets of her mask, and there was a trace of threatening in her clear tones as she demanded:

"Am I to take that as a slur, sir? Do you dare hint that I would lower myself by trying to deal foul with you?"

"Not for the world, my dear lady!" exclaimed the sport in a shocked tone. "It was intended as a compliment, however clumsily expressed. I always admired a lovely hand, but I never met one before—as I am now fully convinced!"

"Very pretty, but decidedly taffy-ish! In a quiet way, let me advise you to reserve your pretty talk for the ears of a woman, instead of wasting them on a money-making machine—which I am, just at present. The game awaits you, sir!"

"Your servant, Madam Machine! Luck before science, every time!" and tossing a crisp bank-note into the air, he watched it float down and cover the ten. "I'll touch you lightly at first, until we see how the cards run."

There was a little buzz among the watchers at this, for they could all see that the bill was for one thousand dollars. If this was "lightly," what would it be when the dashing sport "got down to business."

Coolly, imperturbably as a veritable machine, Queen Titania dealt the cards, deftly slipping them one by one from the polished silver box, only pausing when the ten turned up as the winning card.

Leaning lazily back in his chair, Johnny Wild nodded as Queen Titania glanced at him after paying his winnings.

"As well there as elsewhere," he said, lightly. "I am only testing my fortune, as I had the honor of observing before. Let the game go on, Madam Machine!"

Not for long. At the second turn the ten won again.

"Never ride a willing horse to death, is one of my mottoes," smiled the sport, dividing his

winnings and placing them on the ace and another card.

It was astonishing how closely fortune clung to him, for through that deal and into the next he hardly lost a bet. And when he did this, it chanced to be one of the smaller ones.

By this time he was surrounded by a circle of men, three deep, all eagerly watching the progress of the game, their interest steadily growing as they saw the cool sport keep his original stake in play as well as all his winnings, until the "lay-out" was almost covered with bills. And a long, pent-up breath came from their lungs as he successfully called the turn, thus receiving four times his stake.

Gathering in his winnings and stacking them neatly before him, the Thoroughbred critically watched the shuffling of the cards by those white hands, then observing:

"Of course a lady never attempts to aid fortune by any peculiar sleight-of-hand?"

"What do you mean by that, sir?" flashed Queen Titania.

"Nothing at all; the remark merely slipped between my teeth unawares. Still, it is lucky, for I never yet saw fingers nimble or dexterous enough to cheat my eyesight."

At this instant a heavy hand fell upon the shoulder of the sport, and he whirled sharply around, to confront the giant gambler, whose face was very pale, whose eyes flashed with a dangerous fire as he spoke:

"Guard your tongue a little more carefully, my dear sir, or it may get you into trouble. We play on the square here, and permit no man to throw out hints of foul dealing."

"I'm delighted to hear it," coolly drawled the sport, staring fixedly into the face of the big man, then adding, with a most insolent drawl: "And who the devil are you, anyway?"

"My name is Saul Oberlin, and—"

"Faro Saul, eh? Well, I'm Johnny Wild, from Frisco, and I came all this distance to shut you up in business! Look on, if you like, and take a few notes. It may result in giving you a fresh start in life, after I've got through with you."

At the coming of Faro Saul, and particularly after one glance into his hard-set face, the crowd hastily scattered to either side, evidently fearing the passing of worse than compliments between the two sports; but as he concluded, Johnny Wild turned his back toward the giant gambler and sorting a handful of bills so that a glance would determine their value, placed them on the king, quietly uttering:

"We'll give baby-play the go-by now, and get down to business, since there is a master of the art looking on and taking notes. Let them slip, Madam Machine, if you please."

There is no necessity for noting the turn of each card. Now, as from the very first, fortune steadily stood true to the bold gamester. And as he raked down wager after wager, with hardly a loss to vary the flowing tide, Faro Saul grew paler and paler, while the ugly devil crept higher in his black eye.

Queen Titania made the customary pause when the final turn was reached, and without any apparent hesitation or stop for study, Johnny Wild said, suiting his action to his words:

"Ten thousand that I catch the turn again!"

By his manner of placing his stake, he told his choice of winner, indicated the loser and the card left in hock. In this case he played the queen to win, the nine to lose, with the deuce for the last card.

Slowly Queen Titania slipped out the cards, and a murmur went up from the spectators, for once more the dashing sport was the winner! Only for the ominous presence of the giant gambler, that murmur would have been a shout "fit to take the roof off!"

Slowly Queen Titania counted out the heavy loss, while Johnny Wild turned carelessly toward Faro Saul, saying:

"I'm running over with happiness at meeting with you, my dear sir! I've been amusing myself with baby-play until you showed up! Another turn or two with this fair lady, and then, if you are agreeable, we will have a friendly little tilt."

"Your winning, sir," said Queen Titania, with a perceptible tremor in her voice as she pushed the notes over.

"Let them rest, please. I'll stake the whole on the first turn of the cards. Shuffle, please, and call me when ready."

There was a brief silence, then Queen Titania said:

"Not to-night, sir; the bank is broken!"

Scarcely had the words passed her lips, when Faro Saul, his voice harsh and hoarse, cried out:

"Not so! The bank never breaks as long as there is a player with a dollar to stake against it!"

Johnny Wild turned and gazed curiously into the now redly-flushed countenance of the Handsome Hercules, whose usual nerve had been lost in that humiliating moment. Then, too, he had given Queen Titania more than one sign which had passed unseen or at least unheeded, and he was fairly boiling over with rage.

"You mean that, my dear fellow?" drawled the Thoroughbred as he blew a ring of smoke from his mustached lips.

"Every word. If you doubt—"

"I do doubt, Faro Saul," and all trace of laziness vanished as by magic. "I doubt it most decidedly, and am willing to back my opinion with ducats! I'll bet any part of \$50,000 that the bank does break, if you dare meet all my bets!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A RATTLE BETWEEN APOLLO AND HERCULES.

A MOMENT of breathless silence, then came the excited and slightly wind-broken voice of Don Bobtail Fandango:

"Didn't I tell ye he was a thoroughbred from poll to coronet, from muzzle to fly-flipper an' back ag'in? I'm bettin' all the ducats I ever hed an' lost that the Thoroughbred from Frisco lays clean over—*turned ef I do!*" and the patriotic little stage-driver snatched off his battered hat, flung it up to the ceiling, and almost split his throat with a stentorian "Whooray fer Good Enough, an' bad luck tumble all over the heathen which tries to pull out her tail-feathers to splice onto his own starn-gearin'!"

Faro Saul said never a word in answer to that bold bluff of the Frisco Thoroughbred, though those who knew him best felt a cold thrill creeping over them as they noted how pale his face had grown, how stern-set were his features, and how redly glowed the light in his black eyes. They felt as though their wisest plan would be to beat a hasty retreat before the lowering storm should break, yet were unable to tear themselves away.

For one brief moment Saul Oberlin met that keen, mocking, bantering gaze, then shrugged his broad shoulders slightly as he passed around the end of the faro-table, making a sign for Queen Titania to vacate her throne. Slipping into it herself, he whispered a few hasty words into her ear, when she hastened out through the bar-room.

Handling the cards mechanically, Saul glanced over the table at the bold sport, showing his teeth as he gently uttered:

"I believe I heard you say something about betting? May I ask you to repeat your proposition, and to say it slow?"

"With all imaginable pleasure, my dear sir. You said this bank never broke; I offered to bet your own sum that it would be broken, if you had sand enough to meet all the wagers I saw fit to make."

"Wildcat flyers, or dead-open-and-shut, of course!" sneered the giant gambler, all pretense of politeness vanishing.

"Not at all," was the cool retort. "I leave them to the faro-bankers whom I leave on the shoals. As far as I am concerned, I claim to be a gentleman, even while rejoicing in the name of a thoroughbred sport."

"Do you happen to see any one present whom you think has a less perfect claim to those titles, Mr. Johnny Wild?" slowly asked the giant, the eyes of the rival sports meeting in a steady gaze.

The Frisco Thoroughbred shrugged his shoulders.

"Are we not drifting a little off the point? Business first, and when I have closed your bank, according to Hoyle, I will be most happy to enter on a discussion of morals and all the various items which go to make up a gentleman sport. In one word, will you make me that bet, or do you take water?"

"I have \$1,000 that says you can't make one square bet between now and sunrise that I will not cover. If a dispute arises between us as to what constitutes fairness, the decision to be left to the majority of those present."

"That suits me, and money talks!" lightly replied Johnny Wild, singling out a bank-note and after a rapid glance around the interested crowd, tossing it to Don Bobtail Fandango, with:

"Let our worthy knight of the brake and ribbons hold stakes. He happens to be the only citizen of Good Enough with whom I have even a bowing acquaintance."

With an indifferent shrug Saul assented, and the proud little driver "froze onto" the money right promptly.

"Good enough! and here I come at you, my dear fellow!" cried the Thoroughbred. "One hundred dollars that you dare not go back to the good old honest days of faro, and discard your box."

"What do you mean by that?" sharply demanded Faro Saul.

"Business, pure and simple, no less! As it happens, I am an old dealer at faro myself, and from past experience I know that a perfectly square box is the exception—and a precious rare one at that! Mind you," as the giant gambler made an impatient movement, "I don't say your tools are not among the exceptions, or if they are crooked that you are aware of the fact; I simply give the rule, and make the bet. It's your say-so."

"You mean for me to discard the box and deal faro out of hands?" slowly inquired Oberlin.

"From an uncovered deck on the table, yes."

For answer, Oberlin covered the money staked, and dropped the silver box into a drawer

which opened beneath the table close at his side. Johnny Wild smiled, bowed and said:

"Thanks! the money is yours as soon as the first card is turned. And that may be as soon as you please, my dear fellow!"

Saul glanced up from the cards he was shuffling, with a look of mock surprise, saying:

"Really? I was expecting to have another wager flung at me. I really thought you were going to bet I wouldn't let you furnish the cards for this open deal!"

"Oh, no," was the careless reply. "I am not quite so particular as all that comes to. I would not have made the other proposition, only I very foolishly one day took an oath to never wager heavily on a game of faro where a box was used. As for the cards, they matter but little, as long as they are unassisted by artificial machinery. I flatter myself that I can read a marked card as truly as the next man, and would ask no better bonanza than to have a well-heeled banker try to run in a deck of that sort on me while playing out of hand. What I can't read at sight, is pretty apt to be to the dealer as Greek is to an idiot."

"You have no small opinion of your powers!"

"Because the past has proven them. When you have a little less business on hand, my dear fellow, I'll be happy to show you my record," was the cool retort. "But as I was about to remark: of course there are such things as slipping the card, to favor the bank, but by a curious chance, I never had a thing of that sort happen to me twice in succession."

As he spoke, Johnny Wild laid a short-barreled but heavy calibered revolver on the table before him, after deftly twirling the cylinder around and making sure it was in perfect working condition.

"If the cards are marked, so much the worse for the dealer. I can read them at sight, and place my bets accordingly. The man don't live who can deal second on me from an open deck. If he should be fool enough to try it, there would be a funeral next day, and I'd furnish the material."

"Is that intended as a threat, Mr. Wild?"

"By no means," with a low bow. "Simply a statement of fact. Of course, if you think it worthy, you can take it as a mild sort of warning."

Faro Saul made no answer, for just then Queen Titania came hastily in, bearing with her a small, but stout metal box.

The giant gambler opened this below the level of the table, then took up the cards and shuffled them deftly, all tell-tale emotion banished from his face, voice and eyes. Queen Titania stood beside him, armed with a little ivory rake, as if she intended to act as croupier.

Having shuffled the cards, Faro Saul passed them over for a cut, according to the rules of long-ago, then turned the deck face upward. Johnny Wild smiled a little at this mute indication that his significant hint concerning the use of marked cards had not fallen on entirely sterile soil, but said nothing, "spreading" a handful of notes and placing them on the ten. With another bet "coppered" on the ace, he nodded.

Saul slipped the "soda" or exposed card aside, and with a light laugh the Thoroughbred pushed the money staked on his wager that the giant would not dare play with open deck, across to Queen Titania, saying in answer to her look of inquiry:

"First blood for the bank! May it be a good omen—for the man who best deserves the smiles of fair but fickle Fortune! Let the game roll on, my dear fellow!"

A dozen or more cards were dealt, before either of the other two bets were effected, when two aces appeared in the same turn, thus forming what is technically known as a "split." It may hardly be necessary to state in this connection, that these "splits" form the greatest percentage a dealer has, since in all such cases the bank is entitled to take one half the amount which may have been placed on the cards affected.

The Thoroughbred gave no signs of annoyance or chagrin as Queen Titania divided his stake, simply adding to the remainder, and blowing another ring of blue smoke. And a couple of turns later his nerve was rewarded, for the third ace appeared on the banker's side, which made the "coppered" bet a winning one for the player.

"The ace always did hold a spite against me," he said, with a careless laugh, drawing down his winnings. "But I rather got the best of him that turn. \$5,000 goes on the deuce. I always was a deuce of a fellow!"

"To talk, do you mean?" quietly interjected Faro Saul.

"Is it a rule of the house that a man must bridle his tongue?" ejaculated the Thoroughbred, in mock dismay. "If so, I fear I must jump the game. I never could keep still. Took after the mother's side of the house, you see."

"It is Liberty Hall in that respect, of course," a little tartly retorted Saul. "We have a good many newly-fledged sports in the course of a year, and it would not be politic to bind them by manly rules."

"So glad!" softly murmured the Thoroughbred. "Think I will have to offer you an engagement as dealer, when your present occupation is gone. Bear it in mind, please, and jog my memory in case I should forget."

"Ain't he a daisy, jest!" came from proud Don Bob, in a theatrical whisper, causing an audible smile among the deeply interested spectators.

Even while marveling at his audacity, they could not help but admire his matchless nerve in so boldly bearding the lion in his den—so to speak. Not alone in his play, though that was far beyond the usual limits, even of a fast mining-town, but for his grit in chaffing to his very face a man with the wide-spread reputation of Faro Saul. Many of them looked on it as little short of suicide, and there was more than one whispered offer to bet that the Frisco Thoroughbred would go to bed that night with his boots on!

Faro Saul made no reply, but coldly proceeded with his dealing, at the third turn winning the bet on the deuce.

As coolly Johnny from Frisco doubled his bet on the same card, drawing languidly:

"The deuce is in it, and it's got to come out!"

At the next turn, his bet on the ten was lost, and as quietly replaced. Then, next card, brought the deuce out in his favor, thus more than recouping him for his losses. Drawing down the stakes, he quietly watched the fate of his wager on the ten. This was not decided until near the end of the deal, when fortune again stood his friend, and another serious hole was eaten into the capital of the bank.

His face white and stern-set, Faro Saul waited motionless while Queen Titania counted out the amount of his latest loss. Then, as the Thoroughbred made no move toward placing another stake, he glanced inquiringly across the table.

"Drive on, my dear fellow," was the quiet response to his silent query. "We've got the whole night before us, and some of our good friends here might think themselves defrauded were we to cut their suspense too short. When the last turn is reached, please wake me up."

Even more than his losses, heavy as they had been that evening, Faro Saul was more bitterly stung by the cool insolence which was concealed beneath that air of politeness. And his white teeth came together with an ominous click as he slipped card after card from the deck, only pausing when but three cards, besides the one exposed, remained undealt. The two cards lying immediately beneath the exposed card, and on top of the last, or card in hock, of course formed "the turn."

As Saul paused, the Thoroughbred drawled: "Sorry, but I must pass this time. I never did like a cat, even in faro. Start up and begin afresh, please!"

The spectators interchanged quick glances at this event. So careless had the Thoroughbred seemed that this close keeping the run of the cards without "case keeper" or "cue-card" to freshen his memory, appeared extraordinary. It was really the case, as proven when the Faro Prince ran out the cards, that the last turn consisted of a "cat" or "cat-batpen," meaning two cards of the same denomination besides one other, beneath the last card shown in the previous turn.

By this time, the crowd were pretty well convinced that the Thoroughbred knew his business, and the outside betting took a turn accordingly. Saul did not look any happier for hearing several wagers offered, without takers, that the bank would be broken by Johnny Wild.

The new deal was begun and conducted on pretty much the same style as the one preceding it. Johnny Wild bet freely, and though he pursued no regular "system," so far as those who watched the game so closely could discover, his winnings were again considerably in excess of his losses. There were less words spoken, and it looked more like a business game, despite the ostentatious carelessness of the Thoroughbred.

The cards remaining in the deck were growing low, and despite his iron nerve, Saul could not entirely conceal his uneasiness at the tide of fortune turning so strongly against him. Not that he loved money so exceedingly, but he had so often boasted that his bank had never yet been closed by a rival, and the veiled insolence of this dashing, unknown sport had so thoroughly nettled him, that he would rather have lost his good right hand than be compelled to declare his own defeat.

And despite his efforts at self-control, he could not keep a vivid light from leaping into his eyes and the warm blood from dashing across his pale face as Queen Titania drew in a heavy wager near the end of the deal. The cards had run so regularly that there was no chance for a second "cat" at the end of the deal, and instinct told him that the Thoroughbred intended to strike him heavily then, when winning meant a loss for the banker of four times the stake risked.

His expectation proved to be well founded. The last four cards proved to be ace, exposed,

and therefore out of the game: deuce, seven and knave.

Rapidly running over the bank-notes before him, Johnny Wild dropped a package on the table, saying quietly:

"Twenty-five thousand dollars on the deuce, with knave left in hock!"

Faro Saul, white as a ghost, cast a glance into the mask which Queen Titania wore, according to custom. She was busy with her hands inside the box below the table, but with a barely perceptible pause, she made a slight motion which the giant gambler rightly interpreted to mean that he had enough money to pay this heavy wager in case fortune should still frown upon him. And this fact was owing to his having early in the evening paid another visit to the helpless victim of his bitter grip of steel, Marcus Tudor.

Breathlessly the crowd hovered around the table, watching for the slow motion of the giant's fingers, for they knew that a few seconds now must decide the fate of the bank, unless fortune smiled upon it. And a gasping breath came from many a strong pair of lungs as they saw the cards come out.

The Thoroughbred had "called the turn!"

"Who says the deuce is not the gambler's best friend?" lightly laughed the winner, daintily flipping the ashes from his cigar. "Your turn comes next, my dear fellow!"

Not a word said Saul while Queen Titania counted out the enormous sum; then he pushed it across the table, saying:

"Take your money, sir. Count it first, please."

"Never mind. I mean business now. All goes on first turn of the next deal, if you are agreeable."

"The bank is broken!" slowly, hoarsely muttered Faro Saul.

CHAPTER XXII.

BEAUTY AND BOOTY ON THE TURN OF A CARD.

HOARSE and strained was the voice of the Handsome Hercules as he forced himself to utter the announcement which was more bitter to him than death itself could have been.

Not a sound came from any of the excited spectators, for with their knowledge of the reputation which Faro Saul had won, they expected no less than that the final test would come in the shape of firearms or cold steel. And with this feeling they shrunk back from the faro table, warily ready to dodge any stray compliment in lead.

For the first time since planking his initial bet, the Thoroughbred from Frisco showed symptoms of surprise, taking the cigar from between his teeth and gazing into the white, hard set countenance of the giant gambler with widely distended eyes for a moment before uttering:

"So soon? How annoying! I was just beginning to get my hand in, and intended to commence betting with the fresh deal."

It required all Faro Saul's self-control to keep him from leaping like a wild beast over the table at the throat of the man who crowded so much insolence into so few words. Not that the speech itself contained aught at which he could grasp as a pretext for a quarrel, for all was polite on the surface, but underneath he could detect the sneering insult, and he knew, too, by the same instinct, that this man was his deadly enemy, for some reason at present hidden from him.

"I regret it for your sake, quite as much as on my own account," he forced himself to say, in a cold, mechanical sort of tone. "It is a pity to cut your enjoyment short, but possibly I may be enabled to interest you in some other way. If you can think of any little sport you are partial to, and will let me have an inkling of it, I'll be only too happy to accommodate you, as far as it lies in my limited power. Do you ever shoot?"

"Never, during business hours," was the quiet reply to this pointed hint. "One thing at a time is enough for me to attend to, and if you please we will run this little game out first."

"I told you the bank was broken," sullenly replied Oberlin, with an evil glance from the corner of his eyes.

"I heard you, but maybe we can hit on a chance for you to get your money back. If a fair question, how much money have you remaining in bank?"

Faro Saul nodded to Queen Titania, who promptly replied:

"Five hundred dollars."

"And one thousand in the hands of our worthy stage-driver. Not a bad nest-egg, looking at it cheerfully. Many a man has ridden a smaller horse over the tide to fortune."

Saul gave a sickly smile, but said nothing.

"At what figures do you hold this place, including the house, fixtures, stock and good will?"

"Do you think of purchasing?"

"I can tell better after an answer to my question," was the careless retort.

Oberlin sat in silence for a few moments, mechanically shuffling the cards which had played him false for the first time in many a long day; then he said:

"In round figures, fifteen thousand dollars."

"Cheap as dirt at the price, too!" nodded the Frisco Thoroughbred, counting out a little pile of bank-notes and ruffling them lightly between his fingers as he continued: "As yet, our first bet is undecided, for you have covered every wager I have actually placed on the table. As I believe in sweeping clean, I'll have one more shy at it. There's \$15,500, which I lay against your property here and the money you have left in bank. Shuffle your cards and deal, then I'll pick out the card to decide the whole affair."

Saul hesitated, and those who were watching him the closest, were ready to take oath they detected a faint tremor in his hands as they played around the cards. It may have been that Johnny Wild was one of those keen-eyed observers, for there was something very like a trace of mockery in his clear voice as he ejaculated:

"My dear fellow! surely the trump card of Good Enough is not beginning to lose his nerve?"

"I'll show you where the nerve comes in, before the sun rises, Mr. Wild," grated the Hercules, as he swiftly shuffled the cards, cut and turned them face upward. "Make your bet as soon as you please."

"The deuce has been kind enough to me thus far, and I never go back on a tried friend," was the light response, as the nonchalant sport dropped his money on the card indicated.

Saul dealt the cards deliberately, coolly, having to all appearance regained control of himself and his stormy passions. Queen Titania, her eyes blazing through the holes in her mask, leaned forward to catch the first glimpse of the card which was to decide the wager, and it was from her action in drawing back with a gasping breath that gave the others their first intimation of the way fortune nodded. The deuce came out winner.

The White Elephant now belonged to the bold Thoroughbred from the Pacific Slope!

"Let the deck remain as it is, if you want another shake for your thousand!" quickly cried Johnny Wild, as the Handsome Hercules seemed on the point of casting the faithless cards away.

"What do you mean?" he demanded slowly. "I have no more money, at least where I can put my hand on it at this moment, and I play no man on credit."

"I have taken a fancy to Good Enough. I believe I'll try my hand at running a gambling-hell once more. Unfortunately the camp is not large enough to support two first-class establishments of this sort, and, as a stranger, I would work at a decided disadvantage against an old-established favorite like Faro Saul, should he conclude to open out again."

"What are you trying to get through you? The town is free to all, I imagine, and who shall say I have no right to open up a game, provided I don't ask help to stock it?"

"For that very reason I propose to buy you off, or stake a round sum against your pledge not to open a game in Good Enough for a term of five years. Will ten thousand dollars be a fair price?"

Saul nodded in silence. He could not deny the liberality of this dashing sport, however intensely he had grown to hate him.

"Another fancy, which may seem a little harder than the one just mentioned," added the Thoroughbred. "Though I don't want opposition, I do want the services of your faro queen to preside over the table she has graced for so long. In a word, and looking at the matter in a purely business light, I am ready to stake \$25,000 on a single turn of the cards, against her services. What say you, my dear sir?"

Before Saul could choke down his angry astonishment sufficiently to reply, Queen Titania leaped lightly upon the table, crying sharply:

"Close with his offer, Saul! I never yet brought you anything but good luck! Place all on a single turn, and with that amount for a starter, you can yet cut his comb and lower his proud crest in the dirt! Take him up, Saul Oberlin!"

"Good advice, my friend, take my word," drawled the Frisco Thoroughbred, leaning carelessly back in his chair, gazing with a languid sort of admiration at the beautiful figure thus prominently brought into view.

And Faro Saul, gambler to the very core, hesitated no longer. The offer was a princely one, and if he could only win—he must win! The cards could not always favor one side, and surely this was the turn of the tide! As Queen Titania said, she had never yet brought him bad luck. He would accept the offer, and with the thousands thus won, would easily retrieve the remainder of his heavy losses. After that—and his strong white teeth came together with a savage click that betokened trouble for the audacious sport.

"Very good; I accept your wager. Pick your card and let's have it over with," he said, his voice cold and unnatural.

"Like to like—beauty to beauty—on the queen of hearts, my angel, if you please!"

With a savage stamp of her small foot, Queen Titania obeyed, covering the money and the card saying sharply:

"Just so will I trample on your face and your heart, if the foul fiend decrees that you are to win me!"

"Good enough, my beauty!" with a bow and a careless smile that showed how lightly her threat weighed on his mind. "I always did admire pluck and a spice of Satan in a woman. It makes it so much more interesting when one comes to bridle them! I am sorry for only one thing."

"You are more fortunate now than you will be when you win Queen Titania, then!" flashed the little spitfire. "In that case, your whole life will be one enormous regret!"

"Now I am sorry that I placed your value at so low a figure!" with a mocking bow. "In the days to come I will try to make amends for my ungallantry just now."

"Enough of this idle prate," growled Faro Saul, flashing a wicked glance into the face of the glib-tongued sport. "If you are ready for business, say the word."

"Ready!" with an uplifting of his brows. "My dear fellow I always am ready, let what may be to the fore!"

"Possibly I may recall that remark to your notice, before many days," pointedly.

"When you will receive the same answer, never fear."

"Deal, Saul Oberlin!" cried Queen Titania, stamping her tiny foot with renewed emphasis. "Choke off his bragging by crowding loss after loss upon his head! Deal—to win!"

"If he can—fairly," sharply supplemented Johnny Wild, drawing the cocked revolver a little nearer his right hand. "If he should try to turn a trick, there will be a funeral in Good Enough to-morrow, and I'll be one of the mourners!"

If he spoke thus in the expectation of shaking the now restored nerves of the Hercules, he counted without his host. Steadily as though merely a trifle depended on the run of the cards, Faro Saul slipped off the bits of pasteboard one after the other, making a purely mechanical pause after each turn. Greedily, breathlessly the crowd watched the progress of the deal on which both wealth and beauty depended. Never before had any of them witnessed a like stake.

After one of these brief pauses, the Hercules disclosed a knave for himself, the same action, by slightly disarranging the card, told all that another court card lay directly beneath, and of course was the one favoring the player. Johnny Wild softly grasped his revolver. Faro Saul swiftly removed the knave—and the next card was the queen!

"Won, by the 'tarnal jumpin' jingoes!" cried Don Bob.

Faro Saul flashed one swift glance toward his successful rival, but as he saw that the Thoroughbred held his pistol so that the muzzle covered him, he tossed the cards over his shoulder with a short, hard laugh, rising from his chair as he said:

"You have won, Mr. Wild. I wish you joy of your new acquisition! May she serve you as faithfully as she has me!"

"Thanks! Sorry that I could only gain at your expense; but such is life in the Far West! Another time, perhaps, the tide of fortune may set as strongly in your favor."

"I live in hopes. You can take possession when you like. Queen Titania has all the keys, and can give you any information you may lack. I will see you later. Perhaps from the other side of the table, or, who knows? I may even have the temerity to propose a little trial of skill and test of nerve with you, one of these pleasant days! For now, adieu!"

"One moment, please!" cried the Thoroughbred, as the defeated gambler was turning on his heel. "Don Bobtail Fandango—oblige me by paying the stakes you hold to this gentleman."

In silence Saul Oberlin received the money held by the little stage driver, thrusting it into his pocket. Once more he was checked by the voice of the Frisco Thoroughbred:

"It is a nice little nest-egg, and in your hands, may easily lead to a fortune."

"True; I may recoup myself through its aid. Who knows?" with that hard, metallic laugh that told so plainly of hot and dangerous passions surging below the surface. "It may even be the means of placing you where I now stand; a beaten, disgraced gambler! Stranger things than that have happened!"

"And a stranger one is just about to happen!" cried the successful gambler, his voice ringing out clear as a silver bell, all trace of carelessness vanishing from his person as though by magic. "Faro Saul!"

The giant gambler turned on his heel and confronted the speaker, his eyes flashing wickedly.

"What do you want of me? Spit it out, curse you!"

"I arrest you on the charge of murder!" cried the sport, with a swift leap aside, adding: "Take him, men!"

Amid the yells and shouts of the startled spectators, a number of strong men leaped upon the Faro Prince from behind, grasping his arms and twisting them back, snapping handcuffs on his wrists before he could make a move in self-defense!

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW THE GAME ENDED, RIGHT OR WRONG.

It was all so totally unexpected—the charge of murder, the attack of the strong men from the rear, and the clicking of handcuffs around his wrist—that giant in size and strength though he was, Saul Oberlin made not the slightest resistance to capture, until after the deed was accomplished.

Sharp and clear rung out the voice of the Frisco Thoroughbred as he threatened the surging crowd with a revolver in each hand.

"Make way, gents, and hands off, if you please! This man is arrested according to law, and the one who dares lift a hand to aid him and foil justice, dies like a dog! I mean business!"

With a snarling curse, Faro Saul shook his huge frame, casting his strong assailants flying as though a cyclone had swept through them, then plunged with lowered head full at his successful rival, baring his white teeth as though he meant to grasp the other's throat with them and worry him as a dog does a rat.

Lightly Johnny Wild leaped aside, and with a combined trip of the foot and stroke with reversed pistol, the Hercules went headlong to the floor with a crash that shook the house from ridge-pole to stringers.

All this occurred with the rapidity almost of thought, and before more than one-half of those in the White Elephant fairly realized the cause of the wild confusion, Faro Saul was lying insensible in the power of his assailants.

Light and active as a cat, Johnny Wild leaped upon the faro table so recently vacated by Queen Titania, and spoke:

"Gentlemen, a few words to you: Faro Saul has been arrested according to law, for murder. He killed Toby Tinker, when that rascal was acting on the instructions given him by Faro Saul himself. The bummer was to insult and frighten Miss Tudor, and then Saul Oberlin was to earn her gratitude by apparently rescuing her from the enemy. He was to shoot, and Toby was to drop as though dead. He did drop, and, he was dead!"

"It was men acting under the orders of Faro Saul who attacked the stage. By his orders Milo Vincent was assailed and left for dead; but it is for still older crimes of the same sort that he is arrested to-night."

"By what right?" ventured a voice from the crowd.

"That I will answer when asked by those who have the right. Until then, as this place and all its contents belong to me, you will oblige me by quietly retiring at once. When matters are fairly straightened out, you shall all be welcome and treated like princes; but now, you must pull out."

And without a word they obeyed.

Secure in the knowledge that trusty men guarded each door, the man who had so thoroughly humbled Faro Saul stood before the Hercules, who lay, bound and ironed, on a pile of blankets in the dimly-lighted gaming-hall. Beside him stood Queen Titania, the mask discarded, her jeweled hands clasped affectionately around the strong arm of the one who had so successfully personated the reckless sport.

"It's a lie! Say it's a lie, Queenie! Brand him as a liar, why don't you?" hoarsely muttered the Samson, his tremendous muscles writhing and swelling as he strove to free himself from his bonds.

"It's the truth, old fellow," retorted the faithless woman, with a light, careless laugh. "I saw that your sun was setting, and of course I changed ends, all the more promptly that by so doing I could help an old and very dear friend out of a nasty hole, and make myself solid with the powers that were to be, as well as make sure you didn't give me any trouble for giving you the dirty shake."

With a spice of impudence which had ever marked her, Queen Titania raised herself on tip-toe and deliberately kissed the man on whose arm she was leaning! It was the last feather, and Faro Saul flung every power of soul and body into one tremendous effort to burst his bonds and avenge himself upon the traitress through whose cunning arts his complete downfall had been wrought. He even succeeded in gaining his feet, but then the red blood burst in a torrent from his lips, and he fell like a log.

Despite all the efforts of his captors to check that hemorrhage, it never ceased to flow until the life of Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules of Good Enough, went out with it.

Queen Titania told no lie when she said she had good cause to remember Frank Deckwright, the St. Louis detective, but that was about the only truthful speech she uttered during that memorable interview in the black chamber. It was not her first interview with the prisoner, thanks to the money which bought the man placed to watch over and guard the detective. And, while Faro Saul supposed the detective was kept constantly under the influence of chloroform, he and Queen Titania were consulting on the best manner to foil the Hercules.

An actress before she took up with the handsome gambler, Queen Titania readily performed her part, aided by a "stage dagger" filled with blood, and the complicity of the man who was detailed to bury the "murdered" detective.

Then, feeling confident that Frank Deckwright was dead and buried, what chance was there for Faro Saul to detect in the Frisco Thoroughbred his ancient foe, much less the uncouth Epaphroditus Weatherwax?

One of the first persons whom the released detective visited, was Marcus Tudor and to him he made a startling revelation. With documents proving his position in life, he convinced the mine-owner that he had the power to perform all he promised, and it was from that very coffer on which Faro Saul had had his covetous eyes for so long, that the money came to make such a dashing display against the faro queen. And, by her dexterous "stocking", after a preconcerted understanding, the first big haul was made by the dashing sport. Afterward, when Faro Saul took the chair, it was good luck and sound judgment that carried the detective through to complete success.

On the forenoon succeeding the death of Faro Saul, Frank Deckwright, now in his own proper person, paid a visit to the house of Marcus Tudor, accompanied by a small, closely veiled figure which needed not a second glance to be identified as that of Queen Titania. And in the library where the mine-owner had been called upon to endure so much mental torture by the man who held him mercilessly in his grip of steel, words were uttered which almost completely lifted the heavy weight from his conscience, and made him nearer happy than he had been at any time since his hand was stained red with the blood of the woman whom he called wife.

Queen Titania did the most of the talking, and the rapidity with which she rattled off her explanation, told how carefully she had studied the situation and familiarized herself with all the various details.

The woman whom Waldo St. John married as Althea Pennoyer, was really an adventuress, who had an eye single to his money, both then and prospectively his. She was far older than she either looked or claimed to be; she had a husband living, in prison, and a son who was almost grown. That son was the person who has figured in this record as Saul Oberlin, the Faro Prince.

It was her convict husband whom Waldo St. John surprised with the false wife, and had his return been delayed another hour, he would not have found either of them. Having robbed the house of all valuables, they were preparing to flee to America, when his coming sent them to death instead.

For, though Althea Pennoyer lived long enough to denounce Waldo St. John as the murderer, and to tell her story to her son, swearing him to never give over until he had bitterly avenged her death, she never recovered from her wounds, dying in hospital. And, of course, it was all false about her having left a daughter to Waldo St. John.

It was Queen Titania who personated Stella Timberlake on that stage journey. She was an ally of Faro Saul's, and it was a part of her mission to make sure that Milo Vincent had the cash with him at the time. A signal informed the road-agents of this fact, and so they "held up" the stage.

And she it was who, aided by a strong resemblance in both face and figure, as proven by the careful description given her by Faro Saul, aided by a photograph of his mother, played the part of the revengeful wife, so adroitly that Waldo St. John never once suspected the deception.

Taking a solemn oath that neither would ever betray by word or hint their knowledge of that tragic page in his past history, Frank Deckwright and Queen Titania, richer by that package of knife-pierced bills, took their departure.

Milo Vincent recovered in due course of time, and, of course, was rewarded with the hand in marriage of Zurilla Tudor—never St. John. Though Milo was told all, prior to his wedding, Zurilla never was the wiser. And it was as well. If he had sinned, so had he suffered and repented.

Good Enough still exists, after a steady, sober fashion, though it no longer numbers Marcus Tudor nor Milo Vincent among the citizens. But Don Bobtail Fandango is still there, and though never since that memorable day has road-agent dared show a masked face anywhere near the little camp, it is sufficient for the fat little driver that they were once seen, felt and held up to public view as positive proof that at last Good Enough was entitled to be called a city!

If he is rigidly sober, he may possibly admit, when cornered, that Good Enough may not be quite as big as New York nor precisely as enterprising as Chicago, but that is his limit. Fire could not make him yield another inch, and should it be a little later in the day, ten to one Don Bob would fight a regiment of giants before he'd admit even that much!

THE END.

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